

The Icarus Agenda Short Guide

The Icarus Agenda by Robert Ludlum

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Characters

The main character of the novel is Evan Kendrick, a stereotypical American hero. George Washington declared that all he really wanted to do was farm his land; he was a general and politician out of necessity. Kendrick similarly declares that all he desires is to run a construction business; his involvement in politics is necessary to clean up the political life of his congressional district. He is handsome, tall, bold, courageous, intelligent, and rigidly ethical. These traits make him the ideal political candidate for the secret society, Inver Brass, which seeks to keep the United States on a sound moral course. Kendrick is a reluctant politician, but Inver Brass intends to force him to become vice president by maneuvering him into a public position from which he cannot escape. The American public will see him as such a great hero that it will demand that he accept the vice presidency. Eventually, President Jennings himself makes such a demand.

The love interest of *The Icarus Agenda* is Khalehla, an exotically beautiful woman of keen intelligence and selfless courage. One of the subplots involves her and Kendrick pretending not to love each other; they deny that a brief sexual interlude early in the novel had any special emotional meaning. Eventually, they drop this pretense and become lovers. In addition to having courage and love in common, she and Kendrick also have the ability to shoot and not miss, even in the dark, and they are passionately committed to the United States.

Among the supporting characters is Manny Weingrass, an elderly but tough Jew who is a father-figure for Kendrick. He has connections to the Mossad, Israel's intelligence agency, and is very wise in the ways of espionage.

Part of Weingrass's function in the novel is to illustrate Kendrick's goodness; when Weingrass is sick, Kendrick takes him home and cares for him, paying three nurses to attend him.

Another of his functions is to help build suspense. He is lovably irascible, and readers are likely to care about what happens to him. He seems forever in harm's way, and his survival is often in doubt. Ludlum is merciless with the supporting characters, letting the forces of evil kill them throughout the novel. Weingrass is granted only a short reprieve from this, and at the novel's end, he is slowly dying from a horrible disease that a corrupt physician has injected into him.

Of the many supporting characters, perhaps the most interesting is the computer expert Gerald Bryce. He is seldom at the center of the action in *The Icarus Agenda*, yet his unseen hand is everywhere. Early in the novel, Ludlum teases the reader with the inclusion of remarks that an unknown figure is entering into a computer log.

This figure notes how his "appliances" are providing him with good information that allows him to manipulate Kendrick into risking life and limb to save the American hostages in Oman.



Is this enigmatic figure Dr. Winters, the brilliant historian and master political manipulator? More likely it is Milos Varak, the Czech masterspy who is dedicated to the well-being of the United States and who serves as the chief intelligence agent of Inver Brass.

It is he, after all, who first presents the name of Evan Kendrick to the board of directors of Inver Brass; he persuades them that Kendrick is the ideal candidate for the vice presidency. Throughout the novel, he maneuvers and schemes, uncovering the traitor among the directors and making Kendrick into a national hero. Yet, when he dies, the scheming continues; the mysterious schemer is neither Varak nor Winters.

A minor computer expert in the State Department, regarded by his colleagues as incapable of the sort of treachery required for the manipulation of Kendrick's career, continues to write entries into the log. Bryce, the true mastermind of the events of the novel, has taken over Varak's job, and he is well pleased with the success of his work.

This lends an ominous tone to the end of the novel.

Early in the novel, the leaders of Inver Brass agree that after becoming vice president, Kendrick is to become president eleven months later; this is all part of their Icarus project. The creator of the plan, Bryce, is still at work. President Jennings may have made himself a candidate for premature death by persuading the reluctant Kendrick to become his running mate.



Social Concerns

Ludlum carefully researches the backgrounds of his novels, a practice evident in *The Icarus Agenda* by the use of Arabic words and phrases and the geographical details of the coast of Oman. Such background detail gives his adventure story a tone of authenticity. Ludlum further enhances the credibility by taking one of the novel's important themes — terrorism — from the headlines of the 1980s.

The terrorists are mostly Palestinians who consider themselves heroic warriors fighting the enemies of their people. For Ludlum, however, they abuse and murder civilians; he portrays them as thoroughly vile, hypocritical, and stupid. As the novel begins, the terrorists have seized the American embassy in Oman; they have periodically dumped corpses from the embassy windows while the crowds outside cheer. Although the terrorists are mostly religious fanatics, they are funded by a businessman whose interest is in gaining a monopoly on the construction business in the Arab world. Although the businessman calls himself "the Mahdi," which is the title of a religious figure, he has little interest in religious faith. Thus, for all their proclamations about their willingness to die for God and claims that their fight is against Israeli oppression, the terrorists actually serve the ends of a greedy businessman. They not only kill children as well as adults, but they also justify their murder of innocent people as revenge for their own suffering.

Ludlum carefully develops the theme of terrorism; the terrorists have their say in the novel, but their claims pale compared with the horrors they perpetrate on others. Their actions do not bring about a Palestinian nation or the promotion of their religion, but rather an increase in enemies of their cause and their own futile deaths.

Even though the terrorists are frightening and have a perversely plausible logic for their deeds, they do not dominate Ludlum's depiction of the Arab world. Instead, Ludlum takes care to show that they are a tiny minority. He humanizes the Arabs, showing both their strengths and weaknesses.

They are generally intelligent people, capable of heroic sacrifice to protect their nations and culture. They also have their poor and venal, as illustrated by the "red-light" section of the city of Masqat. Such characters as the Sultan of Oman complain of how the Western world seems to view the Arab world as peopled by bloodthirsty savages. Ludlum clarifies some of the divisions in Arab society, giving a balanced view of the conflict between good and evil in a part of the world that few Americans understand.



Techniques

The Icarus Agenda has a fine, classic structure. It is written in three clear movements, with each one developing a different aspect of the Icarus scheme.

The novel begins with the Mahdi movement. It is a complete novel by itself; even without the rest of the book it could stand alone with an exciting plot, interesting characters, and a satisfying climax. In the Mahdi movement, the archvillain is the evil businessman who calls himself the Mahdi. He was responsible for the murder of all of the employees of Kendrick and Weingrass' Middle Eastern construction firm.

When Kendrick learns of the strange hostage taking in Oman, he realizes that the secret financial backer of the terrorists must be the Mahdi, who uses terrorist groups to drive competing businesses out of the Middle East.

Ludlum drops hints that the Mahdi story has wider implications, usually by showing the computer log entries of an unnamed mastermind, but otherwise the Mahdi movement's plot develops toward its own conclusion, the death of the Mahdi. All of this movement is found in Book One of the novel.

Book Two represents the main movement of The Icarus Agenda. It turns out the Mahdi story was told in order for the second movement to make sense. This main movement is the working out of the Icarus agenda: using Kendrick's supposedly secret heroism to propel him into the presidency. The main actors in the Mahdi movement were Kendrick and the Mahdi; in this section they are Inver Brass and the advisors to the vice president. When the traitor from Inver Brass alerts the vice president's inner circle to the scheme to make Kendrick the new vice president, the two groups fight a secret war. In panic, one of the vice president's advisors hires the terrorists Kendrick had outwitted in Oman to kill him. Much of the action now becomes bloody thrust and counter-thrust as the two contending forces vie for control of not just the vice presidency but of the presidency itself.

Inver Brass see themselves as visionaries who know that America should spend less on its military and more on easing its economic troubles, whereas their rivals want the big profits that their stealing from the military spending brings them. The Inver Brass traitor sees military spending as the best way to promote scientific research, because the military spends huge sums on research that may lead to new weapons. Neither side is an attractive group, although Inver Brass is more genteel than its rivals and is able to couch its killings and betrayals in high-sounding language. Thus, it falls to Kendrick to form the moral center of the plot. He acts altruistically, but almost inevitably his selfless acts themselves make him a pawn of the Icarus agenda. The climax of the second section leaves Kendrick right where Inver Brass wants him.

The third section is brief. Like a short story, it has only a few main characters and a single, clear plot line.

Kendrick must come to terms with his knowledge that his status as a public hero was created by Inver Brass, but he finds himself needed as vice president.

He is reluctant to assume that position not only because he views his public stature as a sham, but because he does not want to make politics a career. He ran for Congress to unseat a corrupt representative, and he intended to see to it that a new, clean politician replaced him after he had served a term.

Instead, the president of the United States persuades him to take on new political responsibilities. Unlike the first two sections, which had clear and satisfying climaxes, the third section leaves many things unresolved. It does have its own climax, with Kendrick agreeing to do as President Jennings asks, but the novel neither reveals whether Inver Brass will indeed remove Jennings from office eleven months after the election nor whether the CIA will be successful in tracking down the rest of the Inver Brass leaders, after having uncovered Dr. Winters's treachery. And it does not say whether terrorists will try to slay the archenemy Kendrick, rather than see him become the vice president of one of their most feared enemies, the United States.

Themes

The principal theme of the novel is the danger posed to democracy by the ambitions of the few to rule the many.

Ludlum illustrates this theme by showing the people who are the American vice president's closest advisors. Like the Mahdi, they are motivated by greed, and just as the Mahdi hopes to gain control of the construction business in the Middle East, the vice president's advisors try to use him to gain control of America's weapons business.

One of the vice president's advisors actually employs the same terrorists who held the American embassy in Oman; he wants them to murder Evan Kendrick, the novel's main character and a potential rival for the vice presidency in the upcoming presidential election. Their effort to make themselves the hidden rulers of America causes the deaths of many innocent people. Plainly, if these advisors/businessmen were to actually gain control of the presidency then the American people as a whole would suffer.

The theme of the dangers posed by the efforts of the few to rule the many is more subtly embodied in the organization that calls itself the Inver Brass, which was formed by wealthy men during the Great Depression. They used their wealth to help prevent riots and other violence and to encourage the passage of legislation in Congress that would ease the national suffering.

They also developed ways of adding new members to Inver Brass as old ones passed away. By the time of the events in *The Icarus Agenda*, they have a sophisticated intelligence network run by people strongly committed to the well-being of America. Yet, in spite of their good intentions, the members of the Inver Brass are little better than the despicable Mahdi and the vile advisors of the vice president. Coldly calculating, members of the Inver Brass find the deaths of a few innocent people acceptable as long as their aims are served. They use their immense wealth and power to propel Evan Kendrick into the vice presidency, even though he wants nothing to do with the office.

The results of their attempt to secretly manage the country are disastrous for nearly everybody, including one of their members, Dr. Winters, who commits suicide when the CIA finds out what he has been up to. Dozens of CIA agents, terrorists, and innocents are doomed by the conniving of the Inver Brass. In their efforts to save America, they forget about the importance of America's individual citizens, and their work stirs up some very nasty people, leaving corpses scattered across America and the Arab world.

Literary Precedents

The *Icarus Agenda* is a novel of political intrigue of the sort that is commonly found on best-seller lists. Its antecedents include such diverse novels as Fletcher Knebel and Charles W. Bailey's *Seven Days in May* and John le Carre's *Smiley's People*, which have in common the creation of realistic backgrounds and tough, direct prose, which enhances their matter-of-fact tone.

They differ from such tales of international espionage as the James Bond books in that they avoid high flights of technological fantasy and prodigious sexual performances of their heroes.

Still, they are fantasies to some degree; for instance, Kendrick is almost without character flaws, and his wild adventures are implausible at best, with his escape from a Mexican island requiring several unbelievable acts, from disarming a trained and murderous FBI agent to shooting down his enemies in darkness.

To some degree, Ludlum is his own literary precedent. His novels have been immensely popular since the early 1970s and have helped to create the audience that voraciously reads the novels of many of his colleagues, as well as his own recent efforts. One of the standards he has helped set is clear structure; like *The Icarus Agenda*, his other novels tend to have straightforward dramatic movements, allowing the reader to follow the action even when the intrigue becomes complex.



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