

FLORIDA WRITERS

A taut thriller conjures huge neo-Nazi threat



■ **“Hitler’s Silver Box,”** by Allen Malnak. Two Harbors Press. 328 pages. \$16.95.

“Every family has a secret, but Uncle Max’s could wreak havoc on the world.” Such is the official product description for this exciting thriller. Indeed, everything is at stake. What can an over-worked young physician do about it?

Dr. Bruce Starkman’s responsibilities as chief ER resident at Chicago’s Cook County Hospital are interrupted by the news of his uncle’s mysterious death. Uncle Max, the owner of a small bookstore, would seem to have died of natural causes, but there are some suggestions of foul play. Who would wish to murder this seemingly innocuous senior citizen?

Readers know what’s up long before Bruce finds out, as the first chapter of the book lays out a situation in which Max is threatened and tortured by neo-Nazis who ask him for a special box. Max’s refusal to give them what they want or tell them where it is leads to his death.

What arouses Bruce’s suspicion? Well, that his Orthodox uncle is cremated (against Jewish law) and that something is not right about the funeral home paperwork. As Bruce attempts to settle

his uncle’s affairs, more questions come up and there is always a difficult path to partial answers.

Is it a coincidence that Bruce’s ex-girlfriend, a woman who might be considered Max’s confidante and someone who shared his suspicions, dies suddenly? And who is the mysterious man who seems to have unsuccessfully attempted to save her — a man who suggested to Bruce that it would be best not to involve the police? And why was Bruce’s friend on the police force suddenly called away and replaced by a subordinate?

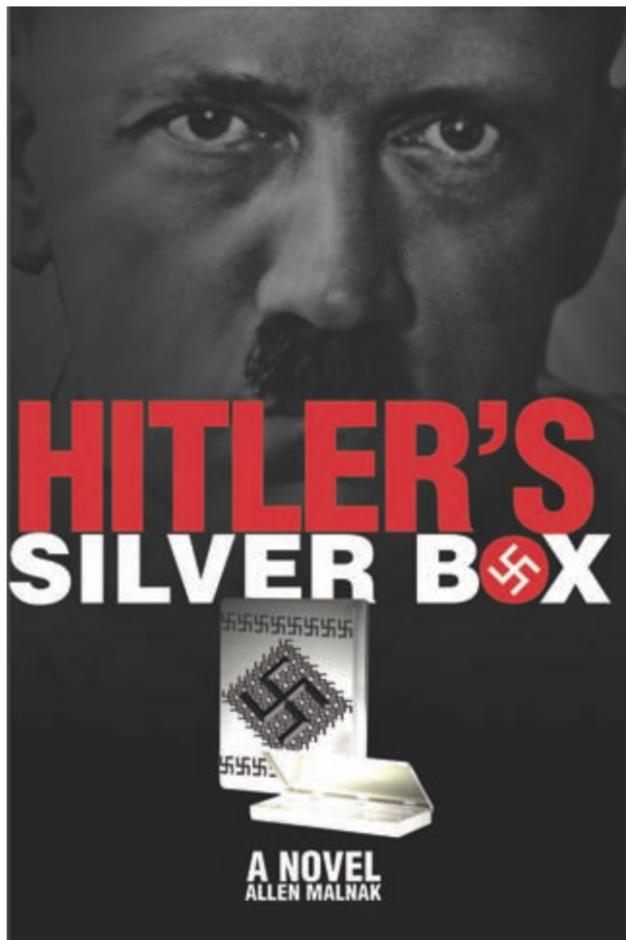
And how does Bruce himself become a suspect?

The answers, as one might expect from the title, have to do with events from Max’s life as a teenager during the Holocaust.

More specifically, the answers involve records from the Theresianstadt concentration camp and the mind-blowing contents of the silver box that, we discover, was crafted under duress by a young prisoner, Bruce’s Uncle Max, who later escaped hid the box.

Bruce discovers Max’s journal and with that discovery he commits himself to following through on foiling the neo-Nazi plot that demands retrieval of the box and its contents —detailed plans for the resurgence of Nazi power and worldwide domination.

Along the way, Bruce meets an Israel-



younger Angelina Jolie in the movie. They join forces in an attempt to find the box ahead of the neo-Nazi leaders and their thugs.

The plot moves from Chicago to Paris to the Czech Republic with heart-pounding energy and tantalizing danger. Allen Malnak’s descriptions of place, so vividly detailed, help make the story credible. The settings — whether interior or exterior, old or new, day or night — draw the reader in. So, too, does the evolving character of Dr. Bruce Starkman, who shifts from one kind of life-saving commitment to another.

In addition, Mr. Malnak, a retired physician living in Bonita Springs, has summoned up a cast of villains to die for.

“Hitler’s Silver Box” is one of those first novels that should have found a major trade publisher. The advanced reading copy that I was given to review suffers a bit from ineffective page design, which detracts from the reading experience. The suspenseful, gripping narrative is worth the effort, however, and the nightmarish premise is made frighteningly plausible. ■

li security official, Miriam, who is perhaps a bit too much of a brazen, brainy, martial and sexually magnetic stereotype Israeli babe. I imagine a somewhat

frightingly plausible. ■

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