

Book Review

Black Sand will make the reader burn the midnight oil to finish

By **CHUCK KONKEL**
I must confess that when I first started reading *Black Sand*, I had serious reservations that Williams Caunitz, the author of two enormously successful best-sellers, *One Police Plaza* and *Suspects*, could pull it off again.

And for the first few chapters, as the plot unravelled like a crusty papyrus scroll, with seemingly endless digressions into Greek history and mythology, I smugly congratulated myself on my original perception. But as I read on, I gradually came to appreciate the well honed skills of Caunitz as a plot developer and the intriguing complexity of *Black Sand* (Crown Publishing, 339 pages, \$24.95) as a tale.

The story opens on the sunny Aegean isle of Voula, with the shooting of two Greek patrolmen and the massacre of a crowd of innocent bystanders by two armed men for no apparent reason. One of the survivors, whose entire family has been murdered before his eyes, is a Greek police major named Andreas Vassos.

Vassos sets out in pursuit. He follows a detailed paper trail that takes the Hellenic official to New York. There, Vassos finds himself partnered with Ted Lucas, a Greek-American cop, who teeters on the brink of abject cynicism as he struggles through the nightmare of modern-day Manhattan with a detective office as cosmopolitan as the United Nations, and much more effective.

Their mission? To find the killers - and, as they soon discover, to recover Homer's *Iliad* from a candel of unscrupulous thieves, common and murderers who will stop at nothing, from strangulation by guitar strings to the use of boa constrictors, to protect their ill-gotten gain.

The national treasure of Greece is truly worthy of a king's ransom

and, at times, Vassos and Lucas must feel they require that ransom to pay off the corrupt officials who populate the NYPD's newly civilianised infrastructure.

Documents are obtained on the sly, cadavers declared truly dead, conflicting fingerprints sorted out; everything is expedited, for a price - for money - in the unfeeling shadow of the Statue of Liberty.

Along the way, bodies are dispatched to their doom with blood-curdling frequency as the two detectives doggedly follow their prey from Greece to Korea to Italy and, finally, to downtown New York, in an unrelenting odyssey that culminates in a chase as memorable, exciting and unlikely as any in recent popular crime fiction. Somehow, along the way, the heroes enlist help from agencies as diverse as the Greek Secret Police, U.S. Customs, the American State Department, the CIA, and - what else in this age of glasnost? - the KGB liaison officer with the NYPD! Yes, Svetlana, there is a Santa Claus!

BEATS POLICE MANUAL
Where Caunitz excels is in his ability to capture and incorporate police trivia into his work. With *Black Sand*, aficionados of the genre of police procedure will be amply rewarded with more interesting, albeit generally irrelevant, snippets of administrative information than is contained in the NYPD patrolman's manual.

That is not to say *Black Sand* is solely the mind-numbing and inevitable toe tags some police proceduralists use to create the aura of quasi-authenticity.

From surveillance techniques to warrant procedures, from fingerprint analysis to homicide scenes, from dental impression work to burst transmitter relay-satellite

transmission, secrets of pinhole photography and methods with which to bypass infra-red alarm systems, Caunitz has created a veritable feast of fascinating minutia, which serves quite suitably as the motor drive with which to drive his multi-layered plot to conclusion.

It is in the area of character development, locale and dialogue that Caunitz stumbles. His people are stick men who move along the numbered grid that is mid-Manhattan. His Greece is as memorable as a spelling bee of Greek culinary delicacies, and not nearly as ambitious.

His Greek police are Manhattan beat cops beamed down to the sunny Aegean, not living, breathing individuals with a cultural identity, behavior and value system of their own. The rich tapestry of Greek life deserves more than *Black Sand* has to offer.

-K.G.E. "Chuck" Konkel is a sergeant with the Metro Toronto Police and the author of the best-selling novel, *The Glorious East Wind*, about the last years of Hong Kong.

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