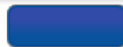




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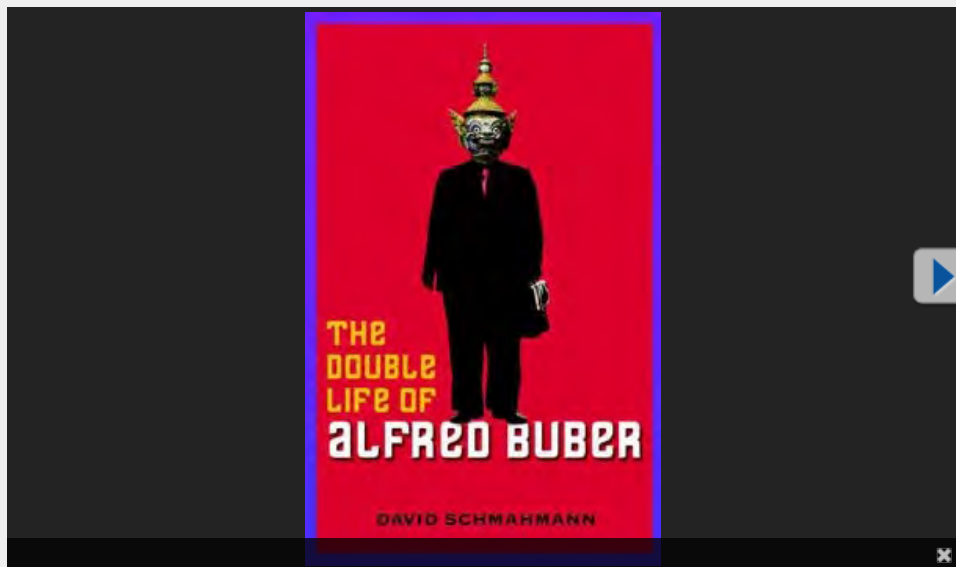
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Fiction review: The Double Life of Alfred Buber

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Credit: David Schmahmann



By DOUG CHILDERS | Special correspondent
Published: June 12, 2011

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Alfred Buber, the narrator of David Schmahmann's slyly captivating new novel, "The Double Life of Alfred Buber," has a secret: He's not who he seems

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to be.

On the outside, he tells us in what Schmahmann presents as Buber's memoir, he's a British expat — "a perfect English gentleman" — who has found financial success and social acceptance as a partner in a Boston law firm.

He's the proud owner of a mansion filled with art, he drives a Mercedes, and his neighbors even urge him to join the local board of aldermen.

But on the inside, Buber is something else altogether.

While women are apparently left universally cold by Buber, a "stocky, bald-headed man," he is obsessed with the fairer sex.

"I coveted them, how could I not, the ones who worked the machines and took my dictation, the young women fresh from law school who held on to my every word as if it were profound; but I acted as if (how do I explain this? The times demanded it) I were impervious to such things, to the gentle voices and the perfumes, the short skirts and the dipping blouses, the eyes, the hair, the graceful smiles," Buber tells us.

So what's a middle-aged, unattractive, repressed man to do? Tell your fellow lawyers you're headed to Paris and then catch the next flight to Bangkok, of course.

There, in the seedy side streets of the sex trade, Buber falls in love with a young bar girl named Nok. And after he flies home, he fantasizes about finding her again and maybe even bringing her back to that Boston mansion, where he can play Henry Higgins to her Eliza Doolittle.

Think of it as "My Fair Concubine."

Sound like a foolish plan? Sure. But don't focus on it exclusively. As Buber spins his tale, he inadvertently reveals clues that he's not being entirely truthful. Here's the question: Is he lying to himself or to us?

Reading "The Double Life of Alfred Buber" is a little like stepping onto a theme-park ride designed by a particularly well-read madman.

As Schmahmann's effortlessly seductive prose draws us deeper into Buber's strange and unreliable world, we'll nod appreciatively at the novel's coy references to literary giants such as Vladimir Nabokov and T.S. Eliot. But we'll periodically look over our shoulders to see if the ride's entrance is still lit.

And when the ride's done, we'll find ourselves running back to the entrance to do it again.

Doug Childers is a Richmond writer and edits WAG, a literary website at www.thewag.net.

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