

TV REVIEW

Hunting the KGB Killers; Inside the Freemasons

The level of first-hand detail in this retelling of the murder of Alexander Litvinenko succeeded in making it gripping all over again

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The poisoned Russian secret service agent Alexander Litvinenko
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Hunting the KGB Killers

Channel 4

★★★★☆

Inside the Freemasons

Sky 1

★★☆☆☆

At a time when we probably don't need reminding that Vladimir Putin would make a great James Bond villain, along comes **Hunting the KGB Killers**, a film that made you wonder why we never see him stroking a white cat on his arm. Here he was presented as puppetmaster in a world of polonium-poisoned tea, personal vendettas and dead dissidents – which you might see as doing little to advance Anglo-Russian relations if you didn't feel he'd be flattered by it.

The story of Alexander Litvinenko's 2006 murder is a familiar one, and it's almost a given that any article on the subject will compare it to the plot of a John le Carré novel

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claiming to be “darker than any fiction”. I'm

Times+

My account

not sure about that, but the saga remains outlandish for being true, and the level of first-hand detail certainly succeeded in making it gripping all over again.

The most astonishing revelations belonged to the former Scotland Yard detectives Brian Tarpey and Clive Timmons, speaking for the first time on camera. As they described their follow-the-polonium trail round London hotels to Arsenal's stadium to Moscow, it became easy to see why they still seem

slightly amazed to have been caught up with bungling Russian killers and rare radioactive isotopes.

Timmons's description of the murder weapon as a "smoking teapot" would have been comical if it were not so tragic. Their trip to Russia became so cloak-and-dagger that the discreet echoes of *The Ipcress File* score on the soundtrack really didn't go far enough. The two cops were followed, had their rooms searched, were given some kind of light poison and had taped evidence nicked from their files. "I'd been outmanoeuvred, like a chess piece, by the Russians," said Tarpey in a line straight out of a spy novel by . . . well, you know who.

If the detective story gave the film a compulsive narrative, the topicality made it downright frightening. What was missing was a satisfying resolution. Litvinenko's widow, Marina, offered a view that the alleged killers — yet to be prosecuted — are already being punished simply because people know who they are. However, if there's any justice this story isn't quite over yet.

Inside the Freemasons made a big deal about the first time cameras had been allowed

behind closed doors to “lift the veil of secrecy”. So what are the organisation’s secrets? I’m still not sure because the film was a cheerful PR exercise for a club in need, like so many others, of younger blood.

The institution’s members bent over backwards to show that there’s nothing Dan Brown about it; that if the rituals may look a bit strange — such as blindfolded new members baring a breast to show they’re not women — it’s just part of the male-bonding fun. Flummery-wise, the House of Lords really has nothing on this lot.

Clearly, this was not intended to be a Louis Theroux-style snoop, yet we didn’t even get to see the famed rolled-up trouser-leg ceremony. I guess the Freemasons couldn’t completely give away their cachet of mystique or their “society with secrets” would simply be the Rotary Club. And where would the fun be in that?

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