

CODENAME: ATHENA



A SCIENCE-FICTION NOVEL
BY MICHEL POULIN

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Corrected Edition © 2014

First English Edition © 2012

Translated and adapted from the novel in French by the same author

NOM DE CODE: ATHÉNA

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WARNING TO POTENTIAL READERS

THIS FICTION NOVEL CONTAINS GRAPHIC DESCRIPTIONS OF WAR, VIOLENCE, CRUELTY AND SEX, AS WELL AS COARSE LANGUAGE AND CONTROVERSIAL SUBJECTS THAT ARE UNSUITABLE FOR CHILDREN. WHILE THIS NOVEL DEPICTS MANY HISTORICAL PERSONS AND EVENTS FROM THE PAST, THIS IS A WORK OF FICTION AND WORDS OR DEEDS ATTRIBUTED IN IT TO PERSONS WHO EXISTED DO NOT REFLECT HISTORICAL REALITY. ALSO, RELIGIOUS-RELATED EVENTS DEPICTED IN THIS NOVEL IN NO WAY REFLECTS THE RELIGIOUS BELIEFS OF THE AUTHOR.

DEDICATION

This novel is dedicated to all the brave women who served or lived through World War Two and who were too often ignored, discounted or ridiculed by men while risking their lives for their countries or their families. Those women include, but are not limited to: the British and German female auxiliaries who served behind the front lines; the women of the various European Resistance cells who too often endured a fate worse than death at the hands of the German secret police; the military nurses who cared for wounded soldiers, and the patriotic female Soviet soldiers, combat pilots and partisans who helped turn the Nazi tide around.

ABOUT THIS NOVEL

This science-fiction novel is the first installment in a collection of seven novels depicting the adventures through time of Nancy Laplante, a female Canadian war correspondent and reserve army officer from the year 2012. The first six books of this series are now available online at the time this corrected edition is being published. This revised edition is meant to correct inadequate proofreading and grammatical errors contained in the first English edition.

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CHAPTER 1 – HOME

15:10 (Montreal Time)

Thursday, October 11, 2012

Boucherville, Province of Québec

Canada

Nancy Laplante stopped her red Mitsubishi Outlander 2010 sports utility vehicle in her reserved parking spot in the underground garage of her condominium building, then cut the V-6 engine and let out a sigh of relief. Home at last! Home and a well-deserved vacation after five weeks on a hard, dirty and dangerous assignment in the border area of Eastern Afghanistan. As the top field correspondent for the military and international affairs magazine CONFLICTS, she spent many months per year traveling to such dangerous, chaotic places around the World. She had however been helped greatly in that assignment by the fact that two of the nine languages she spoke fluently were Pashto and Dari, languages she had opportunities to improve and practice in the past during two six-month operational tours in Afghanistan as a Canadian Army reserve officer. Nancy always had an affinity for languages, something also helped by her phenomenal memory and her IQ of 153, which made her officially a genius according to the Mensa Institute.

Stepping out of her car, Nancy stretched her six foot tall frame to take out the kinks in her muscles. The superintendent of the condominium, who had been changing one of the light bulbs lighting the garage, approached her with a large smile on his face. At 45 and still single, he was fond of Nancy, probably because he fantasized about dating the athletic young woman. At least he kept it to himself and never bothered her.

“Welcome back to Boucherville, Miss Laplante. How was your trip?”

“Tiring, I’m afraid. I’m going straight to my lakeside cottage for a needed vacation. Do you have any mail for me?”

“Oh, your usual mountain of magazines, a few letters and more than a few bills! I’ll go and get them. You will be going up to your condo?”

“Yes, I have to pack for my leave. Could I abuse you and ask for the help of your little luggage cart later? I have to bring down a ton of things.”

The short, stocky man understood her immediately. Nancy's cottage had been burglarized a year ago, with all of her appliances and electronic equipment taken away. Since then, she made a point of hauling back and forth anything of value when she went to her lakeside residence, situated in the Laurentian Mountains.

As the man went towards the elevator, Nancy surveyed her luggages in her car and decided against bringing them upstairs: she would need her notes and portable equipment in order to prepare and edit a full report on her trip during this incoming vacation. As for her dirty clothes from her trip, she could wash them at leisure once at the cottage. She locked her car before going to the staircase of the garage and running up the stairs to the second floor. She fumbled for her keys in her coat pocket and opened the door of her suite, stepping in her comfortably furnished lounge. The first thing she did before anything else was to go in her bedroom's closet to check on her firearms. To her relief, the solid polymer carrying case was still locked and at the exact same place she had left it. Unlocking it, Nancy verified that all five handguns were still there. A smile appeared on her face when she took out her favorite gun from the case. Heavily customized and with gold plating on its frame, the Desert Eagle caliber .50 Action Express pistol weighed heavily in her hand, its 72 ounces of normal weight further increased by a Simmons 3 X 28 scope and a muzzle compensator. That gun had helped her outshoot that braggart American at the last metallic silhouette target shooting competition she had participated in near Albany, in the American state of New York. The moron had claimed that no women could shoot that kind of gun without being knocked back by the recoil. The only things that kept being knocked back when Nancy started shooting then had been the steel plates of the targets at 150 and 200 yards. Putting back in place the huge pistol, she brought the gun case in the living room, then took out a few boxes of ammunition from a separate, fireproof strong box and loaded them in the gun case: the small outdoor range she had built behind her cottage would see some use during this vacation. A quiet knock on the door announced the superintendant, his arms full of mail.

"Oh, thanks, Claude. Could you put these on the kitchen table?"

"No problem, Miss Laplante. When do you want me to help you with your stuff?"

"Not for another hour, at the least. I will come for you when I will be ready. By the way, you can call me Nancy, and thank you for everything."

Claude beamed as if he just had won the lottery.

"My pleasure, Miss La... er, Nancy."

He then closed the door behind him, leaving her to her packing.

It took about two minutes for Nancy to sort out her mail into four piles: one for the junk mail; one for personal letters; one for bills and another, the biggest, for the various specialized military and international affairs magazines she subscribed to. Opening and reading the various letters and bills took her another ten minutes. Finally, she selected the magazines she wanted to bring on vacation. Then the serious job of packing began, with extra caution taken in putting her computer and electronic appliances in their shock-resistant transport boxes. She packed a small but diverse wardrobe, with the emphasis on informal and sports clothing. When she was finished, Nancy started heading towards the entrance door to get Claude to help her move the small mountain of boxes and suitcases, but stopped in midstride.

“Shit! I forgot to check my damn answering machine.”

As expected, the tape was filled to near capacity. Only two calls were worth noting: one was from her editor at CONFLICTS MAGAZINE, reminding her that he needed her story ready in two weeks time; the other was from her army reserve unit.

“Captain Laplante, this is captain Lemire, calling at 15:05 hours on Thursday, October eleven. I would need to speak to you as soon as possible about an operational matter. Please call me as soon as you can. Thanks.”

Nancy swore quietly and called back the regular army officer at the Fourth Intelligence Company, which was housed in a converted warehouse building in the Longue-Pointe garrison in Montreal. To her relief, Captain Lemire answered after the second ring, speaking in French.

“Fourth Intelligence Company, Captain Lemire speaking.”

“Marc, this is Nancy. You wanted to speak to me about something urgent?”

From formal, the tone of Lemire immediately became friendly.

“Effectively, Nancy. You just came back from your latest trip to Afghanistan, I suppose?”

“I just arrived from the airport. Before you ask, my trip was a bit rough: the Afghan Army still has a long way to go before it could control effectively its country...if ever. I also have a few new shrapnel holes in my civilian tactical vest.”

Marc Lemire hesitated a bit before coming to the reason of his call. Nancy Laplante, a junior officer he considered extremely competent, apart from being an extraordinary linguist, already had accumulated in her thirteen years of part-time service more operational tours overseas than any other officer in the whole Quebec Sector, be they regulars or reservists. Her language skills were just too rare and precious for the staffers at Canadian Forces Headquarters in Ottawa for them not asking for her when facing a special manning crunch overseas. The fact that she had

always performed brilliantly and with exemplary courage also endeared her a lot in the eyes of Ottawa.

“Uh, Nancy, I know that you just came back from a working trip in Afghanistan and that your last operational military tour, as part of our expeditionary force for Libya, was completed only twelve months ago, but the Army needs you...again. One of our officers training Afghan Army recruits in Herat, one of our rare people able to speak Dari or Pashto, has been wounded in a Taliban attack and is being repatriated for treatment. Would you be ready to volunteer as a quick drop-in replacement? I promise you that you will be able to skip that whole chicken shit pre-tour training process.”

Nancy giggled at those last words: she and many others at her unit despised the normally mandatory period of pre-deployment training, which went on for months, imposed by Ottawa staffers. While useful to a point, that training was conducted under the aegis of regular combat arms officers and NCOs who too often showed disdain or even contempt towards non-combat trades soldiers. They forgot or overlooked the fact that those non-combat trades soldiers were highly trained specialists whose particular skills were the reason for their inclusion in the mission, and not their skills as frontline combat soldiers. In Nancy's mind, judging the suitability for a mission of, say, a vehicle mechanic on his or her ability to do assault tactics or effect long road marches while wearing heavy backpacks was positively stupid. Reservists were looked upon with even more prejudice by these same combat trade instructors, for their lack of experience and generally less in-depth training. She had herself experienced many times that sort of attitude before during her past tours and had not hesitated then to shut up those instructors by equaling or bettering them at their own game.

“I accept to volunteer, Marc, on one condition: that I am allowed to take first the two weeks of vacation I had planned for on my return from assignment. I really need to decompress and also have to write my tour report for my editor, especially if I have to tell him that I won't be available for another six months...again.”

“Don't worry about that, Nancy. I will advise Ottawa to be patient. With your operational record, I don't think that any of those desk-bound paper pushers will be able to accuse you of slacking off. My only request would be to see you on Saturday, so that I could make you fill and sign your deployment papers and also arrange a visit to the base quartermaster, so that you could replace your used combat gear with new or improved kit. Uh, could you bring your going out uniform with medals at the same time? We are holding as well a short unit parade for the unit's honorary colonel.”

Nancy sighed, seeing her vacation plans already being nibbled away bit by bit.

“Very well, Marc, I will show up on Saturday with my kit and uniforms. Anything else?”

“No! Thank you for accepting to volunteer. You decidedly are an irreplaceable asset.”

“I know.” Replied Nancy maliciously. “See you on Saturday.”

Putting down the receiver, she went back in the bedroom and started stuffing another bag, along with her big military backpack. The camouflaged, shapeless combat uniforms went in first, along with her web gear and kevlar helmet, followed by her goretex camouflaged coat. Last to be packed was her dark green-coloured service dress uniform, with medals. Nancy caressed the rows totaling ten ribbons on the left side of the tunic, feeling pride as she looked at them. At age 30, with thirteen years of part-time service in the Canadian Forces reserves, she wore more medals than most regular officers and NCOs of the Canadian Army, with the ribbon of the Medal of Bravery topping the three full rows of ribbons. She had up to now served on a total of seven operational field missions overseas: two times in Afghanistan and once each in Kosovo, the Syria-Lebanon-Israel region, Haiti, Darfur and near Libya. These tours, along with her experiences as a war correspondent in various war zones around the World, had helped satisfy her unending appetite for adventure and travel. Skydiving about every spring and summer weekends, apart from helping to keep current the parachutist qualification badge on her uniform, also satisfied that craving for action and thrills that had possessed her since being a young girl. She knew her limits, but tried to push them as much as possible by staying in top physical shape, keeping her mind alert, learning constantly and improving herself in every way possible.

Finally done with her preparations, Nancy made a quick trip to the superintendent's office on the ground floor. Claude had already put aside his baggage cart, which made it possible to haul all of the young woman's equipment in one trip via the building's elevator. Another five minutes were used to make all her kit fit in the rear of the Mitsubishi Outlander. She then returned the cart before going back to the garage and driving out. Her first stop was at her bank, where she paid up her accumulated bills and took out enough cash money for her vacation. Crossing the central hallway of the commercial center, she visited a newspapers and magazines store to check for the latest novelties, buying three magazines and a newspaper. Acting on an impulse, she also bought the latest edition of the PLAYGIRL magazine after its cover had hooked her eyes. Going to the big grocery store of the commercial center, Nancy bought a few bags of groceries to stock up her cottage and finally went to fill up her car's tank before heading Northwest towards Lake Manitou and vacation.

17:54 (Montreal Time)

The Laurentians

This vacation was shaping up to be as agreeable as she expected it to be. Contrary to normal for a late afternoon, the roads were not packed solid and she was able to make good time, crossing first into the island of Montreal via the Louis-Hippolyte-Lafontaine tunnel, then passing through Montreal and Laval in record time, taking Highway 15 North towards the Laurentians. The region, a succession of hills and eroded mountains sprinkled with a multitude of lakes and covered with thick forests of mostly pines and firs, was normally beautiful at most times. Now, with the pastel colours of autumn, it was positively gorgeous. Despite the fresh temperature, Nancy rolled down a bit her window to smell the scent of the region, cranking up at the same time the volume of her radio so as to keep listening to the latest song by Shakira, herself singing along in Spanish. Many of her friends had often wondered why, with her fine voice and devastating good looks, she had not gone into professional singing, comparing her to a more muscular and much taller variant of the famous Canadian singer Shanya Twain. Her answer had been that she was too much of an adrenaline junkie to be simply a singer.

Going off Highway 15 at Saint-Sauveur-Des-Monts, she rolled on Road 364, then Road 329, passing near three of the numerous ski resorts in the area, all of which were actively preparing for the hordes of winter skiers to come. The ski resort of Lake Manitou soon appeared, telling her she was closing in on her cottage. A brief stop at a service station let her both fill her car and empty her bladder prior to taking the unpaved road leading to her lakeside cottage. Her now growing joy as she neared the log house in the approaching darkness would have been doused if she had known that she was being watched. Hiding behind a curtain of trees, a large ovoid object floated near the ground in silence. Inside, two bald men with Eurasian features were watching the approach of the car on a holographic screen. One of them used a six-fingered hand to zoom in on Nancy through the windshield of her Outlander. He then spoke in a variant of English that would have been incomprehensible to any human of this time period.

“This is truly a perfect specimen for our first field test of the time distortion analyzer. She should be able to cause massive disruptions of the timeline, hence producing an easily detectable distortion signature.”

“Quite correct. Once our system is proven, we will be able to selectively shape and manipulate an alternate timeline of our liking.”

Nancy finally stopped her car near its side entrance and turned off the engine. As she was ready to step out, a large object suddenly moved into her field of view. She only had time to watch for one second the impossible craft visible through the windshield, her mouth opened ajar in surprise, before a bright beam hit the car and knocked her unconscious. The craft then floated to within a few feet above the car. Both soon disappeared together in a halo of white light.

CHAPTER 2 – TIMELINE

Somewhere in time

Somewhere west of London, England

Both the craft and the Mitsubishi Outlander, with an unconscious Nancy still collapsed on the steering wheel, reappeared in a small clearing near a two-lane paved road. As soon as the car was deposited softly on the ground, the craft moved slowly sideways to a safe distance, then started to gain altitude. It barely had time to start clearing the top of the surrounding trees before a low flying aircraft overflew the opening, heading directly into the craft. Both pilots were equally surprised by the appearance of the other and were unable to avoid the collision.

The resulting explosion was seen and heard by a young woman named Megan Thomas, who was hitchhiking back to Northolt from Aylesbury after having attended her grandmother's funeral. The traffic was still very scarce at this time of the morning and she was wondering if somebody would pick her up after that last ride that had dropped her before turning towards Uxbridge. She was only a few hundred yards away from the fireball and alternatively ran and walked towards the now rising column of smoke. Finally arriving at the site, she saw the burning debris of at least one aircraft dispersed over a wide area. She then noticed a red car in a corner of the clearing opposite the debris. It was immobile and silent as Megan cautiously approached it. Something about the car was weird. It certainly was not a model she had ever seen before and the paint scheme was definitely not military. While it had a rugged, utilitarian air to it, it was also quite attractive and futuristic in appearance.

Megan saw a form, unmoving, in the front passenger seat and circled the car towards it. She understood her mistake only when she was close enough to touch the door handle: the person was sitting in the driver's seat, which told Megan that it was foreign-made, with the steering wheel on the left side instead of the standard right side position in England. Suspicion and fear took hold of her for a moment, but her natural curiosity finally made her look closer. She then saw that the driver was a woman, tall, with neck-length black hair and wearing a brown leather coat. The woman was apparently unconscious. Deciding that she had to do something, Megan opened the driver's door and checked the woman for a pulse: it was slow but strong and she also heard her breathe softly. Reassured, she dragged the woman out of the car and laid her in a more comfortable position on the ground. The stranger was indeed very

tall for a woman and quite heavy, even if she was athletic-looking. It reminded her of ballet dancers, who had strong but svelte bodies. The stranger was certainly pretty, with a well-developed figure further enhanced by skin-tight black pants and short, elegant black leather boots. Her face was smooth, with a small nose and large, still closed eyes.

Those eyelids finally started fluttering, revealing pale green pupils. Megan hovered above her face so that she could see her easily. A soft moan was followed by a few weakly spoken words that sounded like French. Trying to remember her school years French lessons, Megan spoke slowly, hoping that the stranger would understand her. She did.

“How do you feel, Miss?”

“My head... hurts. Where am I?”

“I just dragged you out of your car. You were unconscious.”

The stranger hesitated a moment, then switched to English, to Megan’s relief.

“Your... accent. British?”

“That is correct. My name is Megan Thomas. And yours?”

“Nancy... Nancy Laplante. Where am I?”

“Near Uxbridge. I was hitch-hiking towards Northolt when I saw the explosion and came here.”

Megan was surprised by the sudden look of alarm on the stranger’s face.

“Uxbridge? Northolt? What explosion? Could you help me sit?”

“Certainly, Nancy.”

Megan had to use most of her strength to help her, as Nancy was still quite groggy. The French woman surveyed her surroundings with apparently increasing dismay and panic.

“My cottage, the lake, where are they?”

“I don’t know what you are talking about, miss. You are near Northolt. Where are you from?”

“Boucherville. I know of no Northolt near Montreal.”

Megan was not able to speak for a few seconds. Was this woman crazy? At least she now knew that this Nancy was Canadian, not French.

“Montreal is in Canada. This is England, miss.”

“...England? I...”

Nancy rose on her feet slowly and shakily. Megan had to help keep her from losing her balance. She finally steadied Nancy against the car. The Canadian, or so she claimed, looked around with horror.

“My cottage, gone! I was just arriving there for a vacation when that thing showed up over the lake and somehow knocked me out.”

“What thing?”

“Some sort of flying craft of an impossible kind. I...”

Nancy surveyed the crash site at the end of the field, where two twisted aircraft propellers were visible among the debris, along with a piece of fuselage bearing a black swastika, then turned towards Megan, a sick expression on her face.

“You said earlier that this here is near Northolt, England. Were you serious?”

Megan suddenly started to be irritated by all this nonsense.

“Of course I was! What kind of game are you playing? There is no cottage or lake here and, as for going on a vacation, you chose a funny place and time for one. We are at war, don't you know?” Megan had nearly screamed her last sentence, which made Nancy flinch. She now looked at Megan's uniform as if she was seeing it for the first time, scrutinizing in particular the various patches sewn on it. She suddenly looked sick.

“A British Women Auxiliary Air Force uniform, old style. God, no! **NO!**” She said as she banged her fist furiously on the car's hood. After a prolonged silence, Nancy turned again towards Megan.

“What is the date today?”

“The date? Well, september the second.”

“And the year?”

“Are you kidding me?”

“THE YEAR?”

It was Nancy's turn to scream and Megan's one to flinch.

“But, 1940, of course.”

“Of course... “

Another moment passed in silence.

“Megan, you know what was the date when I arrived at my cottage outside of Montreal?”

Megan suddenly felt uncomfortable.

“September second, 1940, I presume.”

“Not even close. Try October the eleventh, 2012.”

It was Megan's turn to feel funny. What Nancy just said was impossible, pure nonsense, but why would anybody try to push such a ridiculous story? She suddenly realized that Nancy was walking away, going towards the crash site.

“Hey! Where are you going?”

"I'm going to see if I can get some answers. You're coming?"

Megan had to nearly run to keep up with the resolute pace of the much taller woman. What they came across was a typical aircraft crash site: lots of twisted, charred pieces that bore little resemblance with their previous appearance, mixed with a few larger, more recognisable pieces. One of the large pieces was an aircraft propeller. Nancy looked at it for a few seconds, her face grave.

"Bomber propeller, probably German."

Megan was taken aback by the assurance in Nancy's voice.

"How could you be so sure of that?"

"Look at the propeller hubcap. It is large and semi-spherical. Most fighter propellers in World War Two had smaller hubcaps, with German ones having an axial opening for a cannon or heavy machinegun barrel. If I remember my historical references, R.A.F. bases in this area belong to Fighter Command, not Bomber Command."

Megan looked at Nancy with suspicion.

"What do you do actually for a living? You seem to know a lot about military matters."

That made Nancy smile wryly.

"My main occupation is as a war correspondent. I also happen to be a reserve captain in the Canadian military intelligence. Believe me, I have seen quite a few crash sites, although they were of jet aircraft instead of propeller-driven aircraft."

Megan gave her a blank look.

"What is a jet aircraft?"

Nancy started to answer but reconsidered.

"I will show you later."

Continuing her inspection, Nancy was led by the sickening smell of burned flesh to what was left of a person. Megan took one look and immediately turned away before throwing up. Nancy had to brace herself mentally before starting to move away debris from the corpse with a twisted metal bar. She suddenly had a good look at a six-fingered hand and became as pale as a sheet.

"NO! It can't happen to me! Not this!"

"Nancy, what's wrong? What did you see?"

Nancy, shaking like a leaf, sat down away from her discovery. When she looked at Megan again, it was with eyes filled with absolute despair and with tears in her eyes.

"Whoever brought me here against my will is dead. I am now stuck forever in this rotten time period, with everything that means anything to me now 72 years away in the future."

She then lowered her head on her knees and started sobbing. Megan could not help then to feel sorry for her, even if her story was completely unbelievable. She knelt besides Nancy and hugged her until she had controlled her tears. It took a long time.

Her lips still trembling, Nancy raised her face toward the WAAF and spoke in a broken voice.

“What am I going to do now? Nobody knows me. I have nothing left except my car and what is in it and I will probably be locked up in a mental institution if I tell anybody what happened to me today. Even the money I have on me is probably now worthless. I am a castaway.”

Megan silently thought that Nancy was right about the mental institution. However, she couldn't help feel bad for her and tried to comfort her.

“Look Nancy, the one thing of importance now is that we are at war and that England needs everybody's help. You said that you are an officer in you military intelligence. I am sure that they could use your talents.”

“They?”

“My superiors at R.A.F. Northolt. Believe me, we can use all the help we can get these days!”

Which was too true unfortunately. England's situation was truly desperate as it was facing alone the might of the German war machine and was expecting a German invasion at any time. Nancy seemed to think on that for a minute. When she spoke again she sounded like she had finally accepted her situation.

“O.K., I will drive you to Northolt and see what happens next.”

She then got on her feet and led Megan back towards the car. The minute Megan stepped in the car and looked at the interior, she started reconsidering her opinion on Nancy's story. She had seen before the war pictures of supposedly futuristic concept cars at automobile shows. The interior of those cars now looked downright primitive compared to what was now in front of her. If this was a con job, it was indeed an extremely good one. Nancy, on her part, started the engine, then pushed a button on the central console while looking at a sort of small square screen.

“It was to be expected: my GPS navigational unit is not receiving any signal. Too bad: I will have to navigate the old way.”

“A GPS? What's that?” Asked Megan, confused. Nancy answered while tapping the small screen on the central console with one finger.

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