



# HEROINE OVERDOSE

## THE MEDIATED MISSIONS OF STILETTO SPY SCHOOL

Like many women, I have often longed for the power to avert the unwanted male gaze—for the proverbial cloak of invisibility, allowing me to avoid unsolicited comments from strangers while buying groceries, or catcalls when walking home at night. Since invisibility technology is still in the works, though, I've resorted to other solutions: poring over statistics to avoid becoming one, learning conflict-avoidance strategies, biking and driving rather than walking, living in the safest neighborhoods I can afford, and taking self-defense classes.

My goal with the latter is to be prepared for worst-case-scenario events. So I had to look twice when I heard about a new program that encompasses traditional self-defense, but couches it in a peculiar mix of you-go-girl empowerment and action-heroine aspirations. Its name? Stiletto Spy School.

BY Yael Grauer  
ILLUSTRATIONS BY MARTINA MERLINI

“YOU have a daring, confident and gorgeous secret agent inside...WE want to let her out!” screams Stiletto Spy School’s website, the copy going on to promise a “challenging and fun blend of physical and mental training elements that increase self-confidence, awareness, negotiating skills, and commitment to action: Everything a female secret agent needs to know.” Stiletto Spy School offers women the opportunity to attend “missions” where, in addition to learning hand-to-hand combat and stunt driving, they develop Bond-girl personas complete with suggestive “spy names” (one attendee, profiled by NBC’s *Today*, chose the moniker “Betty Ballcaulk”) and lessons in “seductive dance,” poker, mixing the perfect martini, and perfecting their glam makeup skills.

The program, which currently offers “missions” in Las Vegas and New York City, was created by Alana Winter, a business consultant and entrepreneur whose admiration of film and TV action heroines—Emma Peel, Charlie’s Angels, Lara Croft, Sydney Bristow, Uma Thurman’s *The Bride*—inspired her to offer “regular” women the opportunity to learn “valuable skills that will serve you for the rest of your life.” Winter says that participants vary widely, but many of those profiled in the media include soccer moms seeking excitement and novelty. Almost all of the women featured tend to focus on the idea of feeling sexy. For example, *Psychology Today*’s Body blog featured the school in a post headlined: “Stiletto Spy School: Discovering Your Inner Bond Girl. You, too, can be sexy in both sneakers and stilettos.” And the copy promises women that they can “use their wiles to avoid enemy agents.”

There’s a reason this is such an effective marketing strategy. There’s a persistent cultural belief that women want permission to feel powerful. Stiletto Spy School purports to offer them that permission, but in a fantasy world—a world where poker and martinis are as common as covert agents disguised as pole dancers, a world where stunt driving, knife fighting, and counter-reconnaissance are the norm, a world where women can use their stealth and newfound skills to escape all odds and come out ahead.

Although the stated ideal is that Stiletto Spy School participants can adapt these techniques for use in their everyday lives, that seems to be a bit of a stretch. The missions have an air of excitement and intrigue, of glamour and privilege. For those who want to shell out the money—\$3,500 for a three-day “mission” in Las Vegas, \$450 for a one-day mission in New York City—Stiletto Spy School isn’t unlike a trip to an upscale spa or meditation retreat: It’s self-actualization with a luxe, I-deserve-this sheen and some presumably lasting benefits, even if you don’t plan on using your knife skills anywhere but your own kitchen.

The need for women to know self-defense is perhaps the most real-world aspect of Stiletto Spy School’s action-heroine curriculum. There’s self-defense potential inherent in the teachings—in addition to weapons training, the missions focus on being aware of one’s surroundings at all times and attuned to approaching menace. However, neither domestic violence nor street attacks are glamorous, and it goes without saying that women who are in fear for their lives probably worry more about getting away from their attackers than about whether their techniques are worthy of an international woman of mystery. They don’t need to, as the Stiletto Spy School website puts it, “hold their own in a fight, all without breaking a sweat or a nail.” They just need to get away.

There’s a class issue at play here, too. Although self-defense training is absolutely useful for all women, it is low-income women who are disproportionately at risk. According to the National Organization of Women (referring to data from the Bureau of Justice Statistics) “...the poorer the household, the higher the rate of domestic violence—with women in the lowest income category experiencing more than six times the rate of nonfatal intimate partner violence as compared to women in the highest income category.” And though there are myriad other factors at work, one need only compare crime reports in different areas to see that more often than not, this applies to street violence as well.

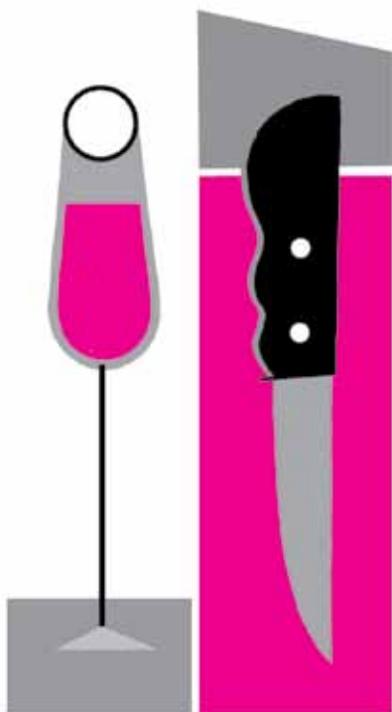
Indeed, Stiletto Spy School founder Winter points out that although there is a wide range of program participants (including women ages 16–65, stay-at-home mothers, and high-powered professionals), they are typically “powerful and dynamic already.” “We don’t usually get shrinking violets,” Winter said when I interviewed her. “We get women who kind of have it going on already, who want to take their confidence and skills to the next level.” Tellingly, however, Winter feels that the ability to defend oneself is incomplete without a dose of sexual appeal. “It’s about women feeling complete. It’s a holistic approach—a whole approach to owning your power. It’s not just about being able to kick someone’s ass. In the past, a woman couldn’t be taken seriously if she was sexy. But if she owns that power, that’s huge in helping her deal with the world around her.”

The problem is that this form of “holistic empowerment” feeds into the already-prevalent notion that female power is generated most effectively when women manipulate their sexuality to control men instead of being controlled by them. What this fails to address is that, successful as the approach may be in the short-term, such “power” basically perpetuates a binary system that serves the status quo rather than working for systemic social change, for a system in which women are respected for the content of their character rather than their ability to appeal to men who prefer female power wrapped in a catsuit and a Barbarella hairdo. And what does it say when women wish to gain power by controlling men, rather than men and women simply respecting one another without being manipulative?

Even if women were somehow able to get the upper hand in this zero-sum game, using their own sexuality to “control” men, it’s also worth noting that this form of empowerment is completely reliant on the existence of men. How can there be Bond girls without James Bond? And let’s not forget that no matter how enticing a Bond girl may be in a particular movie, she can just as easily disappear from the next with no rhyme, no reason, and no explanation.

So how is the sexy spy created in Stiletto Spy School missions different from the sexy *Bachelor* contestant or the sexy bikini barista? Winter

One can’t dispute that many of the nontraditional skills included in the spy-girl repertoire can, in and of themselves, contribute to a woman’s sense of everyday safety, self-esteem, and, yes, empowerment. Self-defense training, marksmanship, orienteering, and



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protests that her spies are “not wallflowers” and have greater skills than your average reality-show contestant, but the distinction seems minor. Whether sexy spies can throw knives is immaterial when the male gaze is the invisible axis on which the entire Stiletto Spy School premise turns. Women learn poker to be able to infiltrate a typically male realm, learn burlesque moves to hypnotize male prey, and learn to present themselves as irresistibly mysterious eye candy.

Interestingly enough, Winter opened a men-only branch of Stiletto Spy School, called MI6—named for the British Secret Service—a year after she launched Stiletto Spy School, to accommodate the many men who were clamoring for a macho counterpart. MI6 missions include many of the same trainings that Stiletto Spy School participants get—hand-to-hand combat, knife fighting, stunt driving, awareness training—but the “sizzling Argentine tango” and learning how to “turn heads any place, any time [sic]” aren’t among them. Kicking ass in style, for men, has little to do with attracting female attention, dressing to impress, or using charm and seduction to enthrall their enemies. The missions, according to MI6’s website, are for men who “love to shoot big guns, race cars and fight.” The word “empowerment” is nowhere to be found.

awareness can help women develop confidence in their own abilities, especially when participants are able to measure success by their own terms or by resources and information they have access to. But many of these skills can be learned at community centers, gyms, or schools—places where they’re more accessible, more affordable, and far less likely to be diluted by a focus on being sexy, charming, and camera-ready first, and strong and capable second. Stiletto Spy School might be a fun way to spend a weekend, but let’s remember that the skills and empowerment it teaches are readily available on our own terms—not those glamorized by outsized action heroines. **b**

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**Yael Grauer** is a freelance writer. She can make fire with sticks, and trains in Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu and No-Gi submission grappling, but has no interest in glam makeup or burlesque dancing.