Spy Stories: The Life and Fiction of John le Carré
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Source: *The Wilson Quarterly (1976-)*, Vol. 10, No. 4 (Autumn, 1986), pp. 158-170
Published by: Wilson Quarterly
Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/40257078
Accessed: 09-12-2018 10:47 UTC

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Spy Stories: The Life and Fiction Of John le Carré

During the years following World War II, a certain popular-thriller glamor attached to the image of Western secret agents. Cold War heroes, they countered the Red menace in Greece, Berlin, Guatemala, and elsewhere. That espionage could be a dubious, often amoral game seldom occurred to the readers of Ian Fleming's James Bond stories. But in 1964, well before accounts of treason and double agents became common media fare, John le Carré's chilling *Spy Who Came in from the Cold* suddenly shattered many illusions. Le Carré's complex moral vision has given his "spy stories" something extra. Here, critic Tom Maddox suggests that le Carré has created significant literature about our times, most recently in his best-selling tale, *A Perfect Spy*.

by Tom Maddox

This is the century of spies. Yet, though they are said to be almost everywhere, we seldom see them, except on television, giving press conferences, or being led, in manacles, from car to courtroom. Knowing that most of the successful ones work in shadows, we wonder who they are and what they do.

So we take pleasure in stories about them, even if our pleasure is often contaminated by the sentiment that spy stories are inherently unworthy of serious attention. Reviewing *A Perfect Spy*, John le Carré's latest novel, Anthony Burgess offered a standard put-down of the genre, if not of the author himself: "Le Carré's talents cry out to be employed in the creation of a real novel." Burgess went on to lament "the myth that the only literature the British can produce on a world scale is sub-art about spies."

One can hear in these remarks more than the waspishness of a novelist reviewing a colleague who has had better sales and received higher critical praise. Here is the voice of High Culture, schooled in the rigors of modernism, unwilling to believe that the spy novel could ever be literature.

Many years ago, Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges made an astute observation about the detective story:

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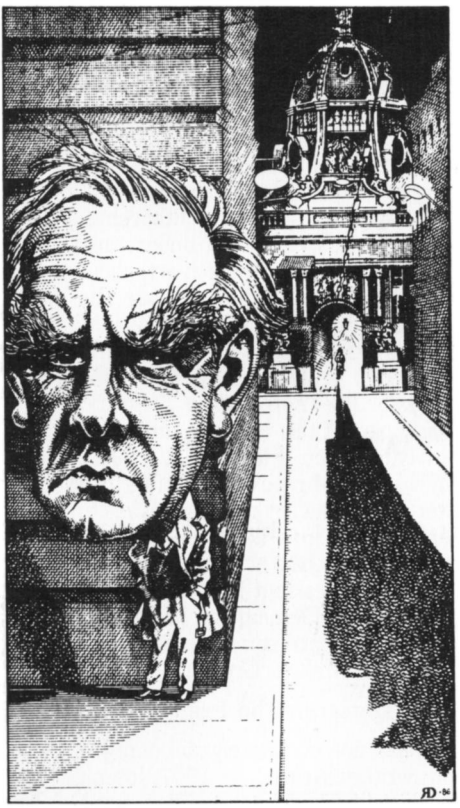

David Cornwell, otherwise known as John le Carré

"The literature of our time is exhausted by interjections and opinions, incoherencies and confidences; the detective story represents order and the obligation to invest." In our day, nearly 45 years later, Western literature is even more filled with interjections and incoherencies, to say nothing of its other ills.

The result is that a vast public—educated, sophisticated—waits eagerly for a writer who can order and invent and still provide the excellences of literature.

Le Carré is just such a writer. And reading his novels has become one of the characteristic literary pleasures of the late 20th century, just as reading the fiction of Charles Dickens was one of the characteristic pleasures of the 19th. Like Dickens, le Carré has invested a popular literary form with the full strength of his personal obsessions. Like Dickens, he has transformed a popular form into high art. Such transformations are mysterious and difficult to explain, but they are marked by certain outward and visible signs. In le Carré's case, they are the literary tradition he inherited, the personal history he brought to it, and the 26-year arc of his fiction.

Any brief survey of le Carré's relation to his predecessors is bound to be unsatisfying. The field is enormous, and literary history, which is in bad enough condition with regard to the certified works of great literature, is in absolutely awful shape with regard to popular genres.

Nevertheless, to refuse to place le Carré in a tradition is worse yet, for then one ignores the fact that his work depends vitally on the existence of the pop-

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ular genre. As le Carré has said, "When I brought back, but did not invent, the realistic spy story, it was misinterpreted as a great new wave." Admitting necessary limitations, then, let us quickly examine a small sample of the massive outpouring of modern spy novels.

Rummaging through the 20th century's spy stories, one can understand Burgess's contempt for "sub-art about spies." Inane popular fantasies are the norm, spun by writers as various as E. Phillips Oppenheim (*The Spymaster*, *The Secret*) and John Buchan (*Mr. Standfast*, *The Thirty-Nine Steps*) in the early part of this century, and, more recently, by Ian Fleming (*Dr. No*, *Goldfinger*). Moreover, during the greater part of the spy novel's existence, a literary Gresham's Law has appeared to operate: The bad has usually driven out the good. President John F. Kennedy singled out Ian Fleming for his golden touch, not the more serious practitioner of the genre, Graham Greene.

Depicting the Pest

This has not completely discouraged serious writers. As early as 1907, Joseph Conrad wrote *The Secret Agent*, a novel that stands out among the clutter like a Palladian villa among suburban tract homes. In that acute psychological story, Conrad depicted the secret agent as *agent provocateur*, his nature as unideological, opportunistic, amoral. The force behind this essentially passive creature was provided by the nihilistic madness of people such as "the incorruptible Professor," who is set loose at the novel's end:

> He had no future. He disdained it. He was a force. His thoughts caressed the images of ruin and destruction. He walked frail, insignificant, shabby, miserable—and terrible in the simplicity of his idea calling madness and despair to the regeneration of the world. Nobody looked at him. He passed on unsuspected and deadly, like a pest in the street full of men.

With striking prescience, Conrad portrayed the "pest" we have come unwillingly to know more fully as the political terrorist.

Waiting for Cornwell

However, for serious writers any excursion into spy fiction during the dawn of this century could only be a vacation jaunt—a walk on the literary wild side. Spy stories remained peopled by clean-limbed young lads of enormous pluck and daring and their antagonists, brutal Germans with shaved heads and dueling scars or Orientals of inhuman subtlety and cunning, with no respect at all for human life. For spy fiction to begin to come of age, it had to wait for two distinguished British writers, Eric Ambler and Graham Greene.

In both men's narratives we enter more realistic worlds where despair is as common as heroism, and confusion, weariness, cowardice, and deceit abound. But even though Ambler brought a degree of psychological realism to spy fiction in such novels as *A Coffin for Dimitrious* (1937) and *Journey into Fear* (1940), he began (and remains) too close to purely popular fantasy to become a novelist of le Carré's importance. His novels are usually well-crafted, but they are essentially thriller-picaresque tales of innocents abroad in a conspiracy-filled world.

Greene certainly deserves examination on his own terms, whether we read his early "entertainments" such as *The Confidential Agent* (1939) or his later novels such as the *The Quiet American*

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(1955). But I cannot give such an assessment here. So I will just express my belief that, for a number of reasons, the simplest being his lack of total commitment to the form, Greene never became the quintessential *spy* novelist. Yet, after Greene (and, to a lesser degree, Ambler), the ground had been prepared. The spy novel was waiting for another Briton, le Carré, or, to introduce him under his proper name, David Cornwell.

If, in a heartless mood, one were to design a life for a writer of spy fiction, one might create Cornwell's. His rogue father, Ronnie Cornwell—a con man with vast social ambitions and few, if any, scruples—taught him the intricacies of deception and impersonation, and in the process gave him the terrible gift of being a permanent outsider. Experiencing public schools—both as pupil and master—revealed to Cornwell the intimate ways of the English upper (or aspiring) classes in all their baroque eccentricity and almost insane snobbery. The British secret intelligence service recruited him and schooled him not only in the inherent complexities of spying but also in the vicious, self-destructive, and often pointless infighting so characteristic of bureaucracies.

Serving the Queen

Cornwell's early life had the mobile and elusive quality of a "legend," a term that appears so many times in *Smiley's People* (1980), signifying a fictitious biography created for an agent. As part of the "legend"—that part which implied upper-class origins and prosperity—Cornwell and his brother were placed in public schools, where they were to acquire the manners, morals, and accent of the ruling classes. As a result of this extended exposure, Cornwell has always considered himself a deceiver, a parvenu, "advancing into British society with an undefended back."

Ultimately all this proved too much for Cornwell. "I was not educated at all," he said in an interview in 1977. "We were ruled by the rod and by the athletes; we lived a cultureless existence in beautiful buildings and we were heirs to preposterous prejudices." At age 17 he fled Sherbourne School and spent a year at the University of Berne in Switzerland. There he became fluent in German, developed a lasting interest in German literature, and probably received his first espionage assignment from British intelligence—this last point seeming especially plausible in light of the experiences of *A Perfect Spy*'s central character, Magnus Pym.

After Berne, Cornwell was drafted into the Army and assigned to the intelligence corps in Austria in 1952. His job was to interview refugees who had come across from Hungary and Czechoslovakia, but he may also have been engaged in espionage work, perhaps running agents in the Soviet-occupied zone of Austria.

Enter George Smiley

Service completed, Cornwell returned to England and Oxford, where he graduated in 1956 with a first in modern languages and a young wife, Ann Sharp. Teaching at Eton for the next two years, he found the experience stifling, but it provided him with invaluable background material for *A Murder of Quality* (1962) and, presumably, for the episodes set at Thursgood's School in *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy* (1974).

Then came the Foreign Service years (1960–64), with postings in Bonn and Hamburg. Although his official titles were, respectively, second secretary and consul, Cornwell was almost certainly working for the secret intelligence service. But even espionage seemed not to engage his full attention or energies. Feeling "completely alienated," he turned to writing and in accordance with Foreign Office rules published his books under a pen name—John le Carré, or "John the Square."

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Richard Burton (right) as Alec Leamas in the 1965 movie adaptation of The Spy Who Came in from the Cold.

His two early novels, *Call for the Dead* (1961) and *A Murder of Quality*, were exercises in English murder mystery as much as spy thrillers. They are enjoyable in their own right, but their chief interest is that in them the character George Smiley appears for the first time with a great deal of his biography already intact. He has even been abandoned by his aristocratic, beautiful, oft-straying wife, the Lady Ann, who over the years will prove to be the source of much of Smiley's pain.

Smiley appears at this stage as a reincarnation of the genius detective—pudgy and diffident, he is perhaps related to Father Brown, the priest-detective hero of G. K. Chesterton's novels. Smiley loves "academic excursions into the mystery of human behavior, disciplined by the practical application of his own deductions." This is Smiley all right, but an early Smiley whose detachment has not yet been tempered by personal and professional fires.

Although they garnered respectable reviews, neither of the first novels was uncommonly successful. *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold* was a different story. It made le Carré a rich man—so rich that he could retire from the Foreign Service. More important, it announced that the most extraordinary career in the history of the spy novel was well and truly under way.

Unlike the later books, *Spy* has a single-minded intensity about it. We are thrown into British agent Alec Leamas's

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mind and suffer his trials from beginning to end. Absent are the digressions into other characters' histories that make le Carré's later novels seem like variations upon a form. There is none of the movement "forward and back" that retards the later narratives and provides even their most frantic moments with a curiously leisurely pace.

Rather, *Spy* is filled with revelations within revelations, coincidences, decisions, violent consequences. It has a thriller plot finely machined.

On the Berlin Wall

With the plot providing narrative drive, le Carré attacks moral considerations head on. Fiedler, the relatively decent East German espionage agent whom Leamas is sent across the Iron Curtain to entrap, is concerned with means and ends. He questions Leamas, asking if the British secret service would kill him. Leamas answers, "It depends. It depends on the need...." Fiedler replies, "That is a great relief," and concludes, "We're all the same, you know, that's the joke."

Liz Gold, the naive English Communist who falls in love with Leamas, is forced to consider Leamas's principle that "you believed in things because you needed to; what you believed in had no value of its own, no function." And Leamas himself has a vision that gives ultimate moral structure to the plot. Driving to meet with an agent, Leamas nearly crashes into a family car traveling down the West German Autobahn:

> As he passed the car he saw out of the corner of his eye four children in the back, waving and laughing, and the stupid, frightened face of their father at the wheel. He drove on, cursing, and suddenly it happened; suddenly his hands were shaking feverishly, his face was burning hot, his heart was palpitating wildly. He managed to pull off the road into a lay-by, scrambled out of the car and stood, breathing heavily, staring at the hurtling stream of giant lorries. He had a vision of the little car caught among them, pounded and smashed, until there was nothing left, nothing but the frenetic whine of klaxons and the blue lights flashing; and the bodies of the children, torn, like the murdered refugees on the road across the dunes.

Action and theme come together when Leamas discovers his final betrayal and makes his final commitment: He finds that, to the various secret services, all people, their own agents included, are counters in a vast international game. Therefore, sacrifice and loyalty should be reserved for those we love. At the novel's end, he climbs down from the top of the Berlin Wall to where Liz lies huddled, shot dead by the East Germans (possibly with the connivance of the English), and takes his stand beside her:

> Finally they shot him, two or three shots. He stood glaring around him like a blinded bull in the arena. As he fell, Leamas saw a small car smashed between great lorries, and the children waving cheerfully through the windows.

This is the definitive hard-boiled spy novel, set in a dark landscape of betrayal and subsequent disillusionment, where moral commitments come from the far side of despair.

Yet (and oddly, considering that this book made le Carré's fame and fortune), *Spy* remains somewhat a sport among his books. This superb novel was not for le Carré the beginning of something but the end: Having dispensed with the hard-boiled spy story, he could go on to find his own voice. This proved difficult; his next three novels seem to be digressions, false starts.

The Looking Glass War (1965) is a particularly depressing little exercise. Even more than *Spy*, it seems to have been imported whole from "Greeneland," Graham Greene's spiritual moonscape where virtually nothing lives. Instead of Leamas betrayed, we

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have Fred Leiser as agent and dupe, and the culpability this time lies entirely on the British side. What amounts to a wretched interdepartmental quarrel takes his life. Though Smiley makes an appearance in this narrative, his influence on events is even more tangential than in *Spy*, and the entire "Circus"—as the British secret service and its headquarters are called—appears ready to collapse from viciousness, treachery, and exhaustion.

Viewed against this bleak predecessor, *A Small Town in Germany* (1968) represents something like a recovery of nerve. Alan Turner, the investigator who goes to Bonn to trace the disappearance of a British embassy second secretary, is humane, dedicated, honest—a younger cousin of Smiley's, so to speak—and he pursues his research with much the same patience and understanding that will characterize Smiley's researches into the identity of Gerald, the mole in *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy*.

A Romantic Failure

Unfortunately, the plot has a counterfactual absurdity at its core: le Carré's assumption that "an amorphous Movement of popular resentments, popular protest and occasional violence has come into being." Published in 1968, the book floats in an odd social vacuum, given the topsy-turvy politics of the decade, and in fact makes little or no political sense. Le Carré's "Movement," which provides the various conspiracies crucial to the plot, is not quite of the Right or the Left, neither Baader-Meinhof nor neo-Nazi. The West Germany of *Small Town* undoubtedly rings true in a multitude of small details—le Carré is always notoriously careful in such matters—but in the larger sense it never exists at all. As a result, the novel floats right off into fantasy; for the only time in le Carré's career as a novelist, his grasp on milieu is unfirm.

After this interesting failure comes the least-read, most-vilified le Carré novel, *The Naive & Sentimental Lover* (1971). It is also his only work of nongenre fiction. The consensus (with which I agree) is that the book is virtually unreadable, a total failure. Whether the consensus is mistaken this first time around, as it is so often, I will leave to others to discuss.

One wonders how le Carré felt about his writing at this point. Though both *The Looking Glass War* and *A Small Town in Germany* have their partisans, neither book has ever seemed remotely as important as *Spy*, and, as I have said, le Carré's subsequent foray into the nonspy novel caused general discontent. In retrospect, it seems as though le Carré had placed himself in a rather tight corner.

Smiley's Circus

Not too tight, however, for a resourceful writer to escape from. Between the years 1974 and 1980, he published the three books of *The Quest for Karla* trilogy—individually, and in sequence, triumphs. Le Carré returns in these books to a Circus that has grown more complex and interesting, and to Smiley, who will gather around him "his" people, each of whom, like a character in a medieval mystery or miracle play, will step forward and have his say.

With plot, character, theme, he must proceed always by indirection: This appears to be the lesson that le Carré learned. Show first; explain later. When Lacon, political adviser to the Circus, gives Smiley his commission—to find the mole Gerald—he says, "You'll take the job, clean the stables? Go backwards, go forwards, do whatever is necessary? It's your generation, after all. Your legacy." For the next three novels Smiley patiently does exactly this, and the narratives move crabwise along with him. In *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy*, he sifts through the files, accumulating knowledge both from what the records say and

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Alec Guinness as British agent George Smiley in the 1982 TV version of "Smiley's People."

what they should say but don't. In *The Honourable Schoolboy* (1977), the process is described as, and goes by the name of, "back-bearings":

> By minutely charting Haydon's path of destruction . . . by exhaustively recording his selection of files; by reassembling . . . the intelligence culled in good faith by Circus outstations, and balancing it, in every detail, against the Intelligence distributed by Haydon to the Circus's customers in the Whitehall marketplace, it would be possible to take back-bearings . . . and establish Haydon's, and therefore Karla's, point of departure.

This is espionage as scholarship and psychohistory, perhaps even as a way of making order out of the ruins of a chaotic, catastrophic past. The Circus's history (Bill Haydon, the mole, infecting it with treachery from near the center), like David Cornwell's, demands to be reconstructed from within. Where there should have been love and loyalty, there was treachery. Patiently the scene is reconstructed; the crucial question—"Why (don't you love me, have you betrayed me)?"—can never be answered. One can, perhaps must, make up stories about Bill Haydon (and Ronnie Cornwell, le Carré's father). But one can never explain their actions, which ultimately wear the shroud of inscrutable fate.

However, out of the process of trying to solve these oedipal riddles, new questions will emerge, new victories will be laid on top of old defeats, new joys on top of old sorrows. This appears to be le Carré's wisdom: personally, as he seeks to cure his own wounds; professionally, as he establishes the novelistic style and method of his maturity. Smiley, whom he has created, teaches him to proceed by patience and indirection.

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Thus the three novels open obliquely, in each case beginning with a retarded narrative, as if to say, "Patience, patience. This is important, and as the story unfolds, you will see." In *Tinker, Tailor*, we begin in the rain at Thursgood's School with Jim Prideaux, the agent who has been farmed out after being betrayed by Haydon; in *The Honourable Schoolboy*, we listen in on old Craw, Luke, and the Dwarf, foreign correspondents at their club in Hong Kong; in *Smiley's People*, we begin with Maria Ostrakova, an aging Russian expatriate, and a KGB thug in Paris.

Each of these episodes is crucial in varying degrees to the story that will follow, each is rendered with loving, obsessive attention to personality and place, and each is sounded in the string-quartet prose that we now associate with le Carré: expressive, unostentatious, rhythmic, controlled.

Hand-held Lights

Jim Prideaux's story can serve for them all. Near the beginning of *Tinker, Tailor*, he wrings the neck of a trapped owl, just as, near the end, he will wring the neck of Bill Haydon, the mole, the betrayer. The first of these actions is of enormous emblematic importance—signifying Prideaux's willingness and ability to perform the unpleasant but necessary act of violence. The second act provides symbolic justice—Prideaux, the betrayed friend, serves as the arm of all whom Haydon betrayed. However, *we actually witness neither act*. We see Prideaux through the eyes of his student, Bill Roach—the fat, asthmatic, friendless child of rich, divorced parents. ("Coming from a broken home, Roach was also a natural watcher," we are told, a piece of bitter wisdom from le Carré's past.) Through Roach we measure Prideaux's character and receive a partial reflection of the extent of his pain. The greater demands of plot are held in abeyance as this smaller and more immediate story unfolds.

Commenting upon *The Little Drummer Girl* (1983), *Newsweek*'s reviewer remarked of le Carré that "he writes romances—stories which subordinate every element they contain to the tyrannous demand of plot." Not exactly. Plot *ultimately* will rule, yes, but one can deliberately deflect its force and, having promised the reader to tell one story sooner or later, proceed to tell any number of others.

Allow me my own minor digression. During the late 1960s I saw Jean-Louis Barrault and his Parisian company perform a trendy multimedia show called *Rabelais*. The arena stage permitted one to watch Barrault when he was not acting. He was always busy: directing, or manipulating hand-held lights, or somehow urging his actors on by the mere force of his presence from where he kneeled, almost lost among the audience. Whatever he did, without upstaging his company or making a show of his influence, he was the controlling hand behind the drama.

Now the obvious point: As Barrault was to his troupe, so is Smiley to these novels. As each character's story is shown or told, Smiley hovers closely by, sometimes listening, sometimes proceeding with his work of understanding "forward and back," almost always interpreting for us the meaning of these lives.

Entropy Conquers All

Smiley embodies a humanity that is consistently at odds with his profession. The secret service wishes to dispense with that humanity, the consensus on high being that humane virtues have outlasted whatever limited usefulness they might have had. So Smiley comes and goes, comes and goes: Before *Call for the Dead* is completed, Smiley has resigned; in *Spy* Leamas is told that Smiley "isn't with us anymore" (though this may or may not be yet another deception inflicted on Leamas); and Smiley is

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called from retirement first to hunt down the traitor within in *Tinker, Tailor* and once again to tidy things up after General Vladimir, an Estonian agent, has been killed in *Smiley's People*.

Here, characteristically, he pursues a course very different from that expected of him—rather than burying Vladimir as quietly and deeply as possible, Smiley seeks to understand his death and, in the process, is led back to his primal antagonist, Karla, a high-ranking Soviet agent in Moscow Center. To put the matter shortly, the secret service needs Smiley, at least from time to time, but does not want him.

And what does Smiley feel about these things? When he is thrown out, apparently for the final time, at the end of *The Honourable Schoolboy*, he writes to Ann:

> Today all I know is that I have learned to interpret the whole of life in terms of conspiracy. That is the sword I have lived by, and as I look round me now I see it is the sword I shall die by as well. These people terrify me, but I am one of them. If they stab me in the back, then at least that is the judgment of my peers.

This letter, said by one of his friends, Peter Guillam, to be "from Smiley's blue period," expresses very clearly the paradox of Smiley as intelligence officer: No matter what his degree of power or knowledge at any moment, Smiley is always the outsider.

Amid all the pain and human waste, Smiley searches again and again for things of lasting value. Ann, his unfaithful wife, floats in and out of his life, more out than in, and the Circus itself can hardly take Smiley's full allegiance—it is the repository of too much inhumanity, not to mention simple careerism and its elaborate accompanying sophistries. So Smiley is left with his people:

> His thoughts, as often when he was afraid, concerned people. He had no theories or judgements in particular. He simply wondered how everyone would be affected, and he felt responsible.... It worried him that he felt so bankrupt; that whatever intellectual or philosophical precepts he clung to broke down entirely now that he was faced with the human situation.

Smiley's People takes this theme from *Tinker, Tailor*, calls it the primacy of ties that bind, and makes it a central, painful text.

And it is painful. The first turn of the screw concerns Smiley's inability (and, by implication, any good man's) to maintain these ties. Vladimir dies almost forgotten, and, long before his death, is reduced to miserable circumstances. Connie Sachs has to be resurrected by Smiley from physical and mental decay not once but twice. And Smiley's responsibility for Jerry Westerby's death in *The Honourable Schoolboy* remains ambiguous. Guillam responds with anger every time Westerby's name comes up, and the narrative itself worries back and forth the degree of Smiley's culpability, if any. Among the uncertainties remains an unpalatable truth: With respect to our loves, friendships, and deepest loyalties, entropy conquers.

Life in No-Man's Land

The next, more excruciating turn of the screw concerns the extent to which we become what we fight. Smiley is finally able to entrap the Russian master spy Karla precisely because of Karla's concern for his daughter (who is receiving psychiatric care in Switzerland), a fact that introduces several unpleasant ironies. In *Tinker, Tailor*, Guillam conjectures to Smiley, "So Karla is fireproof.... He can't be bought and he can't be beaten?" Smiley's reply is, "Karla is not fireproof, because he's a fanatic. And one day, if I have anything to do with it, that lack of moderation will be his downfall." Yet in *Smiley's People*, Karla's weakness, then his downfall, are not caused by lack of moderation but "by nothing more sinister than excessive

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AMERICA: A FRUIT GARDEN FOR SPIES

Magnus Pym, central character of A Perfect Spy *(1986), is a rising British intelligence official—and a traitor who spies for the Czechs. London assigns him to Washington, where he charms American officials and slips U.S. secrets to Axel, his Czech handler. Magnus describes his experience to his son:*

No country was ever easier to spy on, Tom, no nation so open-hearted with its secrets, so quick to air them, share them, confide them, or consign them too early to the junk heap of planned American obsolescence. I am too young to know whether there was a time when Americans were able to restrain their admirable passion to communicate, but I doubt it. Certainly the path has been downhill since 1945, for it was quickly apparent that information which 10 years ago would have cost Axel's service thousands of dollars in precious hard currency could by the mid-'70s be had for a few coppers from the *Washington Post*. We could have resented this sometimes, if we had been smaller natures, for there are few things more vexing in the spy world than landing a great scoop for Prague and London one week, only to read the same material in *Aviation Weekly* the next. But we did not complain. In the great fruit garden of American technology, there were pickings enough for everyone and none of us need ever want for anything again.

•

Cameos, Tom, little tiles for your mosaic are all I need to give you now. See the two friends romping under a darkening sky, catching the last rays of the sunlight before the game is over. See them thieving like children, knowing the police are round the corner. Pym did not take to America in a night, not in a month, for all the splendid fireworks of the Fourth. His love of the place grew with Axel's. Without Axel he might never have seen the light. Pym set out, believe it or not, determined to disapprove of everything he saw. He found no holding point, no stern judgment to revolt against. These vulgar pleasure-seeking people, so frank and clamorous, were too uninhibited for his shielded and involuted life. They loved their prosperity too obviously, were too flexible and mobile, too little the slaves of place, origin and class. They had no sense of that hush which all Pym's life had been the background music of his inhibition. In committee, it was true, they reverted soon enough to type, and became the warring princelings of the European countries they had left behind. They could run you up a cabal that would make mediaeval Venice blush. They could be Dutch and stubborn, Scandinavian and gloomy, Balkan and murderous and tribal. But when they mixed with one another they were American and loquacious and disarming, and Pym was hard put to find a centre to betray.

love, a weakness with which Smiley himself, from his own tangled life, was eminently familiar." So Smiley waits for Karla at the end and thinks:

The very evil he had fought against seemed to reach out and possess him and claim him despite his striving, calling him traitor also; mocking him, yet at the same time applauding his betrayal. On Karla has descended the curse of Smiley's compassion; on Smiley the curse of Karla's fanaticism. I have destroyed him with the weapons I abhorred, and they are his. We have crossed each other's frontiers, we are the no-men of this no-man's-land.

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Guillam's final remark—"George, you won"—though Smiley assents to it—thus has an unintended cutting edge.

Smiley has achieved a costly personal triumph, but even at this price the final victory cannot erase the major defeats that went before—most especially, the irreparable damage Bill Haydon's treachery inflicted on the Circus. Also, we know that instead of Smiley there will be perfidious and opportunistic careerists at the helm: Control, Alleline, Enderby. Smiley remains, as always, outside. On this somber chord ends the trilogy.

From the *Karla* trilogy to *The Little Drummer Girl* we travel not only in space but in time—not only from England to the Middle East but from the Cold War's yesterday to terrorism's now. This is not a journey we might have expected from John le Carré.

Exorcising Ronnie's Ghost

In many ways the strangest of le Carré's novels, *Drummer Girl* seems to me, like *A Small Town in Germany*, to be built on sand. This time around, however, the political milieu is excruciatingly accurate—whether one is listening to the Israelis or the Palestinians, their voices ring true. Our problems come with one major suspension of disbelief (the heroine Charlie's "conversion" to Israeli purposes) and a recurring conceit—"the Theater of the Real." Le Carré, master hypnotist that he is, makes us swallow these artifices whole, at least while we are reading.

The narrative of indirection has thus been superceded, if only for the moment. Violence moves back onstage, and it carries the characters forward. Their emotions are not reconstructed after the event, through analysis, but are presented as they happen in bright neon colors. These standard thriller resources do not serve the purpose of mere titillation, however: They are not there to elicit the pop novel reader's "I couldn't put it down" response.

Le Carré uses them to further what seems to me *Drummer Girl*'s reason for existing: to communicate the horrible suffering that characterizes this endlessly inhuman Mideast war; and to educate blind Western admirers of Israel to the inhumanity of Israel's own excesses. In short, this narrative impolitely rubs our noses in appalling realities.

As these events recede into history—and one can only hope that these apparently eternal conflicts will recede—then the true virtues and vices of *Drummer Girl* can emerge. At this point, the Theater of the Real seems tiresome, Charlie's malleability a mere authorial device. When we reach the historical moment when the term PLO requires footnotes, then these artifices will be seen clearly.

We come full circle to *A Perfect Spy*, le Carré/Cornwell's exorcism of his father's ghost after a quarter century of fiction-writing. Magnus Pym, the British traitor and "perfect spy" of the title, gives us a narrative within the narrative, a vivid telling of his childhood for the benefit of his son Tom and his colleague Jack Brotherhood. Pym's story is obviously drawn from Cornwell's memories.

Farewell to Truth

Impersonation is one theme. Rick Pym, the father and confidence man, is the master of seeming—all that he says or does is calculated to produce an effect or gain an advantage. Magnus, the son, is the unwitting pupil, his life bent around Rick's lies and treacheries. Spying in its most literal sense is the other theme. To know anything of the truth, Magnus must search through letters, records, bills, and legal papers; he must assume that all stated facts about his father's life are lies. Thus Magnus, schooled in imposture and prying, becomes a "perfect" spy.

By definition, of course, the perfect spy can have no ultimate loyalties. To do so would be to remove the final mask and to accept the exposed surface as

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truth. The perfect spy's inauthenticity is total; he cannot terminate deceit and say, "Here, between these two points I will be myself and tell the truth."

As Smiley feared he had become what he fought, so Magnus Pym and John le Carré/David Cornwell fear becoming Rick Pym/Ronnie Cornwell. One can understand the fear: Cornwell has presumably walked with it since he became aware of the almost incredible falsity that was the basis of his father's life.

As several reviewers have noted, *A Perfect Spy* is not a thriller, not in conventional terms; it is not what you expect. More than that, it is in some ways an anticlimax. Having struggled all these years to come to terms with his father, le Carré does so with such total control and exposes himself with such total candor that one can only follow along and nod in assent—yes, it must have been really horrible.

As reader or critic, however, one absolutely must allow le Carré this book. It is as technically polished as any of his strongest novels, precise in its evocation of place (London, Vienna, Washington, boarding school), memorable in its creation of people and scenes. For all the implied criticism that it does not provide adequate suspense, it is highly enjoyable: Rick Pym is a rather astounding con man, Magnus Pym is a suitably inauthentic spy—not a Hollow Man exactly, but one convinced despite the evidence that hollow is all he can be. Also, though the long-term popularity of the book seems to me uncertain, its importance for le Carré (and aficionados of his work) is assured: Here is the shape of le Carré/Cornwell's dread. It has been brought out in the open and mastered.

The consequences of laying Ronnie Cornwell's ghost to rest are unpredictable. As critic Roland Barthes says:

> If there is no longer a Father, why tell stories? Doesn't every narrative lead back to Oedipus? Isn't storytelling always a way of searching for one's origin, speaking of one's conflicts with the Law, entering into the dialectic of tenderness and hatred?

All next books are wagers. Le Carré himself has said that when an author finishes a book, "He has been to the end of his talent. It is a frightening view."

Like le Carré, we must simply wait to see what happens next, trusting that David Cornwell's bitter experiences will continue to provide material for John le Carré's novels. Though we know that real-life spying is usually vulgar and tiresome, as in the recent Walker family case, we are willing to let le Carré make it all more interesting than it is—with his Circus, lamplighters, marthas, scalphunters, and wranglers; with Smiley, Peter Guillam, Connie Sachs, the Lady Ann. They are not the elements of escapist fantasies but of imaginative fiction. They are pieces of reality transformed by John le Carré and made eloquent as literature about our time.

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