

John le Carre and Cold War Espionage

by Michael Curtis



Alec Guinness as George Smiley

In a couple of well-known articles in 1944-1945 the eminent literary critic Edmund Wilson wrote unkindly of mystery novels saying there was no need to “bore ourselves with this rubbish, the kind of silliness, and minor harmfulness that ranks somewhere between smoking and crossword puzzles.” The authors of these novels did not write very well: Agatha Christie was full of “mawkishness and banality,” Dashiell Hammett, author of hard boiled novels was marked by a certain cold underworld brutality. Wilson professed astonishment that serious public figures of his time, from Woodrow Wilson to W.B. Yeats, were addicts of detective stories. Seventy-five years, he would be shocked and disturbed by the tremendous popularity, millions all round the world, including many U.S. presidents, of this genre of mysteries, as novels and their transformation in film and TV miniseries.

What accounts for this fascination with the genre of detective stories, murder mysteries, espionage tales? First, there is the challenge of a puzzle, intellectual satisfaction in trying

to solve a problem, to figure out the plot, to work out the clues, to get ahead of the detective or person responsible for solving the problem. We get intellectual stimulation by paying attention to the characters and the plot. We are concerned when the normal ordered society we would like to know is disordered by a crime, by violence, by duplicity, and our lives are fictionally disturbed.

One can learn, be educated, and entertained by the mysteries. They are informative, providing knowledge about different types of people and places. We can for example become familiar with the life and cultural tradition of the Navajo people, and with the wonders of the American Southwest through the works of Tony Hillerman, and the facets of life in Venice as well as its splendor and suspicious incidents through the writings of Donna Leon.

The setting of the mysteries contains many types of people, classes, and places from elegant country houses to the mean streets and dark alleys of a major city. We become aware of the variations in human character and the wide variety of human emotions. Suspense is created by the author when we await the revelation by the sleuth, private eye, or hard boiled cop, of the culprit, or even, as in a Hitchcock film, wondering about the nature of the problem. Of course, the reader or viewer must be given all the clues, even if many of them are red herrings and we are cleverly misdirected by clever plotting. In addition, the explanation for the solution must be plausible and logical, and justify the time in its pursuit. Our pursuit has excitement or thrills, encountering something strange and wondering about the means by which the offence has been committed, especially now that DNA and labs are as or more important than weapons, at no danger to ourselves.

The story should be fair so that we have a chance to solve it, and the character and motives of the criminal or perpetrator should be suggested or insinuated. Finally, there is subtle

satisfaction when the villain is caught, when the wrongdoer is brought to justice, or when injustice is corrected. That denouement may be by clean, straightforward sleuths or by more cynical figures, such as those made familiar in film noir presentations or by authors like Dashiell Hammett in *The Maltese Falcon*, and Raymond Chandler in *The Big Sleep*, his puzzling labyrinth virtually incomprehensible story, with their flash backs with narration, intricate plot, and shadowed photography, and stories of betrayals and double dealings .

Following the mid 20th century golden age of British authors of mysteries, among them Agatha Christie writer of 93 books, Dorothy Sayers, and John Dickson Carr, a number of writers were active in the post-World War II era, the years of the Cold War, political tension, psychological warfare, and revelations of espionage by British citizens on behalf of the Soviet Union. Among them were Ian Fleming, creator of James Bond and John le Carre.

John le Carre, born David Cornwell, died from pneumonia on December 12, 2020, aged 89. Cornwell had an upper class education, at a private school, University of Bern, Switzerland, and Oxford where he studied modern languages. His family life, the details of which influenced his later books, was singular. His father was a man of great charm but a con man, an associate of gangsters, a person of extravagant tastes, who traded illegal arms in Indonesia, and later was sent to prison for insurance fraud. Cornwell taught at Eton for two years before joining the British foreign service, and MI5. He acted as a spy at the British embassy in Bonn before being betrayed in 1964 and revealed by double agents to the Soviet Union.

Cornwell's first books were written, adopting the name le Carre, while he was still an official. The first was approved by the secret service because it was total fiction, without reference to his own activity, though many readers thought it

was authentic. In a later interview le Carre said he was not part of the literary bureaucracy, and he didn't "announce his books as a thriller or an entertainment." Yet, the essence of his series of books, mostly terse, though some had a somewhat labyrinth plot, and complex, was that the spy world was not a life of glamor, but one of suspicion, paranoia, full of world weary people and long waits. Some of them have become classics, including *The Spy who Came in from the Cold*, and *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy*. He was caustic about British intelligence operations. His position is implicit in the words of the East German spy, Fiedler, in *The Spy*, "All our work, yours and mine, is rooted in the theory that the whole is more important than the individual."

Le Carre's books feature individuals grappling with moral compromise, treachery, betrayal, and the psychological problems of living a secret life, they are not simple analyses of an instrument of foreign policy. He never wore the white hat of purity. He was well aware of the fallible, flawed individuals, in that spy world, dreary and disorderly, with conflicting emotions and disagreeable characters. He invented the term "mole," someone who burrows in the fabric of our society, little noticed. Le Carre has the former associate of his protagonist say, in disillusioned fashion, "It's not a fighting war, not like in our days. It's gray-half devils and holy angels. Nobody knows where the goodies are."

Le Carre lived, and had been personally affected by a world of treachery exemplified by the Cambridge Five, the British spy ring revealed in 1963, that passed information to the Soviet Union, and included Kim Philby, Guy Burgess, Donald Maclean, and Antony Blunt, art historian who was the surveyor of the Queen's Pictures. His books were written during the Cold War, just after the Berlin Wall had been built in 1961 which cut off West Berlin from East Germany until 1989. Le Carre's fiction to a large extent came out of his secret world of Cold War espionage. His protagonist succeeds by forcing his pompous

nemesis Karla, head of Soviet intelligence, to defect to the West. Le Carre alludes to his own experiences as the espionage headquarters The Circus is based on the real Cambridge Circus, the London location of MI6.

Le Carre's fictional world was one of morally ambiguous reality, far from the glamor and romance of the world of James Bond. He invented George Smiley, short, plump, bespeckled, a decent man in the midst of a web of deceit, brilliant but unhappy because of the infidelities of his socialite wife, melancholy and lonely. He was underestimated, he was seen to "polish his spectacles with the fat end of his tie."

There is a long list of fictional detectives or private eyes who have become well known in the UK and the U.S. through books, films and TV productions. Starting with Edgar Allan Poe's C. August Dupin, the list can include Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes and associate Dr. Watson, Agatha Christie's Hercule Poirot and Miss Marple, Raymond Chandler's Philip Marlowe, Dashiell Hammett's Sam Spade, the TV characters Morse and Jessica Fletcher, the French comic bumbling character Inspector Clouseau, and Ian Fleming's James Bond.

Le Carre's protagonist Smiley, who ironically does not smile, portrayed in his first two novels and a later trilogy, is a complex individual, a man of long silences. Smiley is the antithesis of Bond. James Bond is a seducer, charming, handsome, sophisticated, a contract killer, keen for sensual pleasure, flash cars, involved in thrilling action in glamorous surroundings. Smiley is an isolated figure, unhappy with domestic problems yet devoted to his wife. Yet, though he is a gray figure, in the murky world of spies, in the Circus, he was admired by an unlikely person, Yevgeny Primakov, head of the KGB, who said he identified with Smiley. That alone would justify le Carre's emphasis on moral ambiguity.