



A Spymaster Defects

by F. W. Brownlow

A Perfect Spy by John Le Carré,
New York: Alfred A. Knopf; \$18.95.

As a member of the last generation of English middle-class boys brought up on great expectations of prosperity, glamour, and power, John Le Carré first became famous in America when his obsession with the failed promise of his own society supplied an analogy for American middle-class readers jaded by the extravagant claims being made for theirs.

Le Carré's first well-known story took for its background the fatiguing realities of the Cold War. For thousands who were feeling the strains of East-West conflict, this disappointed Eton schoolmaster and M15 man brought relief in the form of the explanatory theory of "immoral equivalence": However awful the other side is, ours is as bad. According to Le Carré, in fact, ours is probably worse because they at least believe in something, however fatuous, and we believe in nothing at all. A typical Le Carré Englishman lives in an ethical vacuum. At his best, he has a sentimental, schoolboyish loyalty to the symbols of departed power; at his worst, he has the same loyalty to his society that a microbe has to its host, and when he betrays it, it is because it has not provided a rich enough diet.

Even Le Carré, whom an attentive reader will often detect reveling in the nastiness of his world, needed relief from this vacuum, and he found it in a typical figure of contemporary fantasy, the lone, alienated professional, the master-spy who pursues his craft for its own sake. Enter George Smiley, a plump little man who should probably have been a scholar, with the works of an obscure German writer under his arm. Married to an

aristocratic, nymphomaniac wife, Smiley displays a willingness to tolerate rudeness, ingratitude, and betrayal from his employers that puts him somewhere on the far side of masochism. With his wonderful talk of trade-craft, inquisitors, lamplighters, moles, wisemen, and the rest of it (which for all one knows Le Carré made up out of whole cloth, like his own pseudonym), Smiley is the figure Le Carré's fantasy supplied to be the saviour of an intolerable world, the secret master who serves the uncomprehending and the undeserving.

Fantasy is intensely gratifying because it not only provides an alternative to the disappointments and worries of actuality, it fosters the illusion that we understand them. Unfortunately, Le Carré does not like fantasy. He thinks that his *Schadenfreude* qualifies him as a realist who has nothing in common with the late Ian Fleming, and now he has allowed his reviewers and his own solemnity to betray him into taking himself seriously as a novelist. The result is this large, very peculiar book written not for the spy-fiction enthusiast, but for the thesis-writers and their teachers.

The reader must now come to terms with an unreliable first-person narrative by the spy-hero, addressed to a continually changing audience, all wrapped up in the author's own tale of the search for a scribbling hero who has disappeared. Perhaps this is meant to be an allegory of the elusiveness of truth in our times. Then, for the writers of footnotes, the text is dense with allusion, like static in a radio transmission. The hero's father, Pym, and his nemesis, Wentworth, are named after two famous rivals in English history. Platoons of literary ghosts haunt the book, Dickens and Thackeray prominent among them. Some may have slipped in unintentionally, but Le Carré has obviously

rigged most of them himself, not realizing that it is risky to invite comparison.

In the past, readers have forgiven Le Carré a long list of literary sins because his stories have been plausible and exciting. When the story is implausible, the clumsinesses obtrude, not to be compensated for by allusions and fashionable technique. Women, for instance, have always had a rough time in Le Carré's books, body predominating over brain. But in *A Perfect Spy* the author makes unprecedented demands on the reader's credibility with his portrayal of a beautiful, well-educated, intelligent Jewish refugee who becomes the mistress of a crook, steals checks for him, realizes with amazement that she is a thief, and jumps off a tower. The hero's mother, having given birth, ends up in a lunatic asylum, apparently because the author cannot think of anything else to do with her.

The hero's wife is an upper-class girl from a country house called Plush (for heaven's sake!) who can't keep her hands out of his pants. Yet at the end of the book she metamorphoses into a cool master-spy who would never have made the mistake of marrying the hero—or would have seen through him immediately. The beautiful Czech girl Sabina also turns into someone else; having advanced the plot by seducing the hero, she becomes a bureaucrat with a briefcase. Le Carré knows little about women, yet he insists on putting his ignorance on display. It also appears in this book that he does not know much about upper- or lower-class English life either. Born a crook, son of a crook, the hero is somehow transformed by an upper-class education into a simulacrum of a gentleman. Most readers will find the depiction of the hero's origins and schooling implausible, like an unintentional parody of J.B. Priest-

ley imitating Dickens.

The good parts of this book are the scenes of spying: the hero's recruitment, his experiences in military intelligence, and his wife's defeat of his Czech handler. In fact, somewhere inside this big, fat book there is an amusing little story about a pretentious, incompetent English spy, recruited by the Czechs at the outset of his career, who spends 20 increasingly bewildered years working for them until an American computer enthusiast finds him out. The story works when portraying the grammar-school and minor public-school Englishmen Le Carré knows and when it takes us into the wonderfully frumpy, tasteless English middle-class milieu Le Carré can describe so well. The kernel story owes nothing to donnish allegories of spies as crooks and crooks as spies nor to portentous analyses of English privilege by Czech Communists who know even less about it than Le Carré. With scissors and a blue pencil, it might be possible to recover from *A Perfect Spy* the kind of book Le Carré can write, and one hopes that next time, having recovered a degree of humor and self-criticism, he will write it. But this time around, self-pity, ambition, and obsession—and, one suspects, the demands of the publishing market—have defeated imagination.

Best-selling writers have to keep writing, and it may be that the academic audience at whom this book seems to be aimed will read it as a self-reflecting fable of the difficulties of a successful writer of modest gifts lured into pretending to be a major novelist. In that case, the confidence-man hero stands for the author, and the tale's climax is farce: When the combined forces of the American and British publics break into the seaside boardinghouse where the hero has gone to find his roots and sweat out his great novel, all they find is his dead body, an empty vodka bottle, and pages of overwritten, unpublishable manuscript—dismal mementoes of the fallacy that literature is self-expression.

Real readers are harder to trick than professors, publishers, and the fictitious British secret service. They prefer George Smiley any day. His brief appearance in one tiny scene saved *The Looking Glass War* from disaster. He is not infallible and does not always

choose well the company he keeps—witness his incredible wife and the bibulous Connie—but a touch of his tradecraft in *A Perfect Spy* would have done MI5 and the author a world of good. Smiley would not have had Marcus Pym in the house, let alone the service, with his bogus manners and phony literary ambitions. If John Le Carré has the courage of his imagination and his English education, he will bring back Smiley or one of his pupils, and leave the writing of the great confessional-metaphysical spy novel to someone of weaker character and greater pretension.

F.W. Brownlow is professor of English at Mount Holyoke College.

The Right Kind of Spy

by Robert F. Geary

See You Later Alligator and High Jinx by William F. Buckley Jr., Garden City, New York: Doubleday; \$16.95.

In these two recent spy thrillers, William F. Buckley's CIA-trained alter ego makes his sixth and seventh appearances in a decade to play a winning hand in the high-stakes intrigue surrounding crucial moments in the Cold War. On a secret mission to Cuba (Project Alligator) aimed at exploring with Ché Guevara possibilities for easing tensions between the two countries, Blackford Oakes discovers Fidel's newest presents from Moscow, the infamous Cuban missiles. *High Jinx* returns to the 1950's as Oakes's quest for the source of a murderous intelligence leak leads to English traitors of the Philby variety and, finally, to Lavrenti Beria, Stalin's chief of secret police, plotting to become the next master of the Kremlin. Written with style and zest, never lacking in action and suspense, both books are quality examples of the spy adventure's capacity to offer intelligent entertainment.

That Oakes is the author's fictional projection constitutes a minor in-joke in these books. Like Buckley, the CIA man is a Yale graduate with some

education in the English public school system. His ripostes to the Guevara's Marxist verbal thrusts do credit to the editor of *National Review*. In *High Jinx*, Buckley even makes President Eisenhower's National Security Adviser praise *McCarthy and His Enemies*, further teasing readers with the link between author and character. Such authorial winking at the reader offers more than enough invitation to consider what happens when a man who has spent his adult life attacking and defending ideas ventures at last into fiction. Ideas should matter. But will he produce doctrinaire tracts in the guise of novels or will he infuse, even transcend, the thriller's formulations by means of an enriching seriousness and clarity of vision?

Actually, neither is exactly the case. Buckley's fictions are interesting spy thrillers, not weighted down with polemics or heavy reflections. Plot is paramount, and the conventions of the subgenre are deftly executed but not transcended. A reader somehow unfamiliar with the author might be surprised to learn that Buckley has for three decades been championing American conservatism, particularly anti-Communism. For similar reasons, some who cannot abide the author's political philosophy can be found confessing in print to having enjoyed these novels (and hinting that the author should stick to fiction). And, perhaps, some of his admirers

