



License to Thrill

BY MARTIN MORSE WOOSTER



Why do spy novels continue to be popular? The typical answer is that the people who read spy novels would like to know how the world *really* works. That, to me, is only a partial answer; there is more inside information about world affairs in any issue of the *The Economist* than in a spy novel. A more plausible explanation is that spy novels are the only popular form of fiction that uses offices and office politics as a basis for creating adventures. Most of us work for organizations, and

most of us have had disputes with our bosses or our colleagues. The spy novel takes the conflicts of office life and magnifies them. A reader used to thinking, "Joe Downthehall is a lousy person and a bad worker" can easily immerse himself in a novel whose initial premise is "Joe Downthehall is a terrible person; *could this mean he is a tool of Moscow?*"

Until the 1960s, most spy novels were set in exotic foreign settings, as the influence of Ian Fleming and his disciples dominated the genre. Then, in the early 1960s, two British novelists—Len Deighton and John Le Carré (a pseudonym of David Cornwell)—discovered that the spy novel centered on bureaucratic maneuverings could be as popular as one set in casinos, yachts, or tropical resorts.

A quarter-century later, both Deighton and Le Carré are still active; they are the two best British spy novelists. Le Carré is the better novelist, with a fine, dry style, strong characterization, and occasional wry wit. Deighton is the better entertainer, is more prolific, and has a wider range. While Le Carré's only nonspy novel, *The Naive and Sentimental Lover*, was a dismal failure, Deighton easily alternates among World War II novels, non-fiction war stories, and even the occasional science fiction novel. Politically, Deighton is probably a conservative; Le Carré, a leftist.

During the 1980s, Deighton's best work has been in his Bernard Samson sequence: *Berlin Game*, *Mexico Set*, and *London Match*. (*Winter*, a related 1985 novel, portrays events in the lives of the parents and grandparents of characters in the *Game, Set, and Match* trilogy.) These books revolve around Bernard Samson, a fortyish senior spy called out of

a desk job to decide how many traitors there might be in London Central.

There is little difference between the plot of the novels and the plot of the Granada Television adaptation, "Game, Set, and Match," shown on PBS last spring. What the television script lacks are Deighton's funny, often poignant comments about life, many of them quite conservative. Here, for example, is Bernard Samson on communism: "I hate the Communists and the stupid sods in this country who play their game and think they are just being 'caring, sharing, wonderful people'....I've seen them back where they came from, back where they don't have to wear the plastic smiles or hide the brass knuckles."

In *London Match*, Deighton pursues this theme further, as defector Erich Stinnes shows his intellectual side by arguing that Marxism-Leninism is a failed form of Christianity: "'God is dialectical materialism; Christ is Karl Marx; the elect is the proletariat, and the Second Coming is the Revolution.' He looked at me and smiled.

"How do Heaven and Hell fit into all that?" I asked.

"He thought for a moment. 'Heaven is the socialist millennium, of course. Hell must be the punishment of capitalists.'"

But Deighton's favorite theme is the city of Berlin itself, which he uses as a prism through which to view German culture and German history. One sees quite a bit of Berlin in the trilogy, from the world's first automobile beltway (designed by the Nazis) to the anarchic Kreuzberg region of West Berlin. Everywhere Samson and his antagonists travel in Berlin, there are sad reminders of our ugly and brutal century. When Samson and a colleague walk along the Landswehr canal, for example, Deighton tells us that in 1919, communist leader Rosa Luxemburg's body was thrown into the canal, while in 1920, the police fished out of the same canal another woman, who claimed to be the Grand Duchess Anastasia, only surviving daughter of Czar Nicholas II.

These observations about German history and German culture make the *Game, Set, and Match* trilogy memorable. English speakers sometimes find German history and culture impenetrable; Deighton uses the touchstones Berlin provides to add weight and depth to his work. Future critics will think of Deighton as an entertainer, not a major novelist, but he is a superior entertainer and one of the more important spy novelists of our time.

The Russia House,
By John Le Carré,
New York: Knopf,
353 pages, \$19.95

Berlin Game,
Mexico Set, and
London Match,
By Len Deighton,
New York:
Ballantine Books,
\$4.95 each, paper

Polar Star, by Martin
Cruz Smith,
New York:
Random House,
386 pages, \$19.95

*Clear and Present
Danger*, by Tom
Clancy, New York:
Putnam, 656 pages,
\$21.95

*The Circus Master's
Mission*, by Joel
Brinkley, New York:
Random House,
395 pages, \$18.95

By contrast, John Le Carré will probably be remembered as a major novelist, the natural successor to Graham Greene. He wrote his best work in the 1970s, with the sequence of novels beginning with *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy* and continuing with *The Honorable Schoolboy* and *Smiley's People*. These novels center on George Smiley, a laconic, unspectacular scholar who represents the best elements of the British character. He is a hero, and his chief foe, the KGB operative Karla, is a worthy antagonist. Although the plots in this series prove increasingly byzantine (British traitor Kim Philby once said that he gave up reading Le Carré after *Tinker, Tailor* because Le Carré's plots were much more complex than real life), they are nonetheless original, innovative, and memorable.

In the 1980s, however, Le Carré abandoned Smiley for protagonists who became increasingly amoral. In *A Perfect Spy* (1986), for example, the central character, Magnus Pym, is a traitor who has a tortured relationship with his father.

The good news about *The Russia House* is that Le Carré no longer believes in moral equivalence. The bad news is that he apparently now feels that the Russians are good and Americans are wicked.

The Russia House tells the story of Barley Blair, a drunken scion of a fading publishing house, who one day is sent a manuscript from a Soviet physicist who wants to tell the truth about his nation's rockets—that they're incredibly inaccurate, never have been accurate, and never will be accurate. The British secret service intercepts the manuscript, prepares Blair to be a reluctant spy, and sends him back to find the physicist.

I don't know a lot about arms control, but it's clear that the central revelation in the book is inherently implausible: A 25-megaton missile can still cause enormous damage even if it doesn't come within five miles of its target. But far more worrying is Le Carré's attitude toward the Soviet Union.

The Russia House is yet another in an endless series of romances about travelers from the West who discover that primitive people in the Third World (or, in this case, the Soviet Union) have all the virtues lacking at home. Repression, Le Carré tells us, is like calcium; it builds character, strengthens the spine, and prevents lassitude and anomie. For the Soviet Union, in Barley Blair's eyes, is "the last great frontier in an over-discovered world." We in the West should respect the Russians because of "their love of anarchy and their terror of chaos, and the tension in between."

This is the worst sort of patronization. Not every Russian is a villain, but neither is every Russian a hero simply for surviving in a brutal totalitarian state. Indeed, the Russian characters in Le Carré's novel are the haziest in the book, platitude-spouting ninnies built from the thinnest of cardboard. The Americans Le Carré portrays are also not plausible. For some reason, the nature and follies of the American mind are subjects of enduring interest to the

British. When a British writer talks about how he truly *understands* Americans, the American reader should strap on his mental seatbelt and prepare to be buffeted by gusts of intellectual misunderstanding.

Le Carré's Americans are of two classes: thugs and buffoons. When Barley Blair comes to America to be briefed by the CIA, he encounters a nation of brutes: "How deeply they [Americans] yearned to be loved!...Just as to this day they need to be loved for all their staged putsches, destabilisations, and wild adventures against The Enemy Out There....That, I suppose, is the tragedy of great nations. So much talent bursting to be used, so much goodness longing to come out. Yet all so miserably spoken for that sometimes we could scarcely believe it was America speaking to us at all."

Silly passages such as this show how little Le Carré,



despite his technical expertise as a writer, understands the United States—or, for that matter, the Soviet Union.

A far more accurate picture of Soviet life is provided in *Polar Star*, the new novel by Martin Cruz Smith. Smith is a seasoned thriller writer who, in the late 1970s, had a bright idea. Why not write a thriller about the Soviet Union *with a Soviet hero*? This was a novel notion for an American, but the result, *Gorky Park*, was a major bestseller that produced dozens of imitators.

Smith has now produced a sequel to the original book. Like most sequels, *Polar Star* lacks the zest and vigor of its predecessor, but it is still an entertaining work. Once again the hero is Soviet detective Arkady Renko, who, having been disgraced after the events of *Gorky Park*, finds himself in the most menial of jobs—working the "slime line" in the trawler *Polar Star*, where he spends his days gutting fish for a minimal salary. But after one of his colleagues is murdered, Renko once again becomes a detective.



Gorky Park and *Polar Star* share many themes, including the relationship between Russia and America, the nature of the Soviet underworld, and the hypocrisy of Marxism-Leninism. Smith, wisely, does not appear to have a political ax to grind; he is skeptical of everyone and everything. Unlike *The Russia House*, *Polar Star* provides the reader with a wide variety of Soviet characters: dissidents, *aparatchiks*, even a fervent believer in Russian Orthodoxy who calls a Sears catalogue "the anti-Bible."

Smith is at his best in describing why communism doesn't work. In one scene, Soviet sailors visit an Alaskan store and revel in the goods capitalism produces: "No experienced Soviet shopper left a store with his purchase until he'd taken it out of its box, turned it on and made sure it did something. Soviet shoppers also searched for the date of completion on the manufacturer's tag and hoped for a day in the middle of the month, rather than at the end, when the factory management was trying to meet its quota of TVs, VCRs or cars with or without all the necessary parts, or at the beginning of the month, when the workers were in a drunken stupor from having met the quota." For passages such as these, one can forgive Smith for a somewhat predictable plot and extremely gory fight scenes.

The only American thriller writer in '80s as innovative as Smith is Tom Clancy. Clancy has advanced the thriller in two ways. First, he was the first novelist to understand that Americans were tired of novels that assumed that everyone in the military or in the intelligence services was either a ninny, a fool, or a fascist. Second, and more lasting, Clancy grafted some of the themes of science fiction onto the spy novel. There have always been spy novels with near-future settings or with gadgets or techniques that do not currently exist. (Indeed, Kingsley Amis once claimed that *all* spy novels were science fiction.) What Clancy has done is to take some of the *spirit* of "hard" science fiction and inject it into the spy novel.

Clancy has been heavily influenced by Robert A. Heinlein, not just in his respect for the military mind but in his reverence for the competent man. Competent characters, in a Clancy novel, are the heroes; even the villains earn some respect if they do their jobs well. The true bad guys, in Clancy's world, are those people incapable of using the power they hold.

Clancy seems to follow the headlines in each of his novels. His previous book, *The Cardinal of the Kremlin*, was his "Star Wars" novel. His new thriller, *Clear and Present Danger*, begins as a War on Drugs novel and concludes as a commentary (suitably disguised) on the Iran-Contra affair.

Despite Clancy's reputation as the hardest of hardliners, *Clear and Present Danger* is not the sort of book that would cause a William Bennett devotee to drool with delight. There is considerable discussion of the war on drugs, and although I disagree with his conclusion (the war on drugs is justifiable as a response to an attack on a great power), Clancy's

analysis is much more reasonable than the fanatics who froth about drug lords, using the same techniques with which previous generations of propagandists characterized the Kaiser, Hitler, or Tojo.

Halfway through *Clear and Present Danger*, the theme of the book shifts. The villains become, not drug dealers, but "REMFs"—Rear Echelon Mother F*****. While Clancy admires soldiers who do their job well, he has no respect for Pentagon desk jockeys who order soldiers to do thankless tasks. Because Clancy admires the military, his critiques carry more weight than do those of other novelists who feel the military holds all the values they despise. As a result, the second half of *Clear and Present Danger* is much more exciting than the first half, although the book itself, at 656 pages, is far too long. (A prudent editor would have advised Clancy to trim the many passages in the first 200 pages that introduce various characters but do not advance the action.)

A more left-wing view of the U.S. role in Latin America is provided by Joel Brinkley in *The Circus Master's Mission*. Brinkley, son of David Brinkley, is the *New York Times*'s Jerusalem correspondent and a Pulitzer Prize winner. In his first novel, Brinkley suffers from a rare fault among novelists—he knows too much about the subject.

The Circus Master's Mission tries to give an insider's view of the Contra war against the Nicaraguan government. Brinkley shows us the Contra camps, takes us inside the American embassy in Managua, shows the reader the White House mess, and even sets a scene at Kramerbooks and Afterwords, a popular bookstore and cafe.

I am grateful to Brinkley for confirming my worst prejudices about self-important Washington power brokers and journalists—namely, that their lives and opinions are trivial and boring. In fact, everyone in Brinkley's book is equally free to be equally dull. The Contras Brinkley portrays are preening fools; the Sandinistas, fanatic dolts; the government officials, greedy sharks; and even Brinkley's hero, crusading reporter Chris Eaton, knows nothing of life outside his trade. The information Brinkley provides also lacks weight. Does anyone care, for example, that the Nicaraguan 50-cordoba note is purple and shows "Commandant Carlos Fonseca, martyred hero of the revolution, bespectacled, somber, and determined"?

The Circus Master's Mission fails because Brinkley lacks the imagination good spy novelists require. Spy novels should not merely replicate current events but should instead use these events as a springboard to launch the authors' economic and political ideas, opinions, and insights. For the best spy novelists, like the great novelists of the 19th century, are *both* superb reporters and novelists. In a time when a growing number of novelists are self-absorbed solipsists who feel that the world outside their skulls is a dull and dreary place, the success and continued growth of the spy novel is a welcome development.

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Passion over Prudence

BY STEVEN HAYWARD



The first heavy casualties of the French Revolution were rabbits."

Detail and interpretations of this kind fill nearly every page of Simon Schama's magnificent "chronicle" of the French Revolution. In this case, Schama finds significant the widespread rural disregard of the laws protecting wildlife when, in the hungry spring of 1789, a plague of rabbits threatened to devour what was left of a meager harvest. Huge mobs of farmers and laborers roamed the fields, pummeling every form of life encountered. Soon these same mobs would be waylaying grain shipments, leading to disruptions and unrest in Paris. The rest, as the cliché goes...

Citizens ought to be the final book on the subject of the French Revolution. But you know it won't be. The French Revolution will always be a big deal because it raises in pure form many of the classic political questions: How should representation be determined? What is the relationship between violence and legitimacy? Is the good man the same as the good citizen? To what extent can or should government work to mold the virtue of its citizens? Is totalitarianism just an updated form of ancient tyranny, or is it something new?

*Citizens: A Chronicle
of the French
Revolution,*

By Simon Schama,
New York: Knopf,
948 pages, \$29.95

The French Revolution also raises great historical questions. Cause and effect, always problematic for historians, are even more elusive for the French Revolution. The most basic themes remain controversial. Was it, as R. R. Palmer and many other historians have argued, "the great turning point of modern civilization," the crucible of modernity, and, as Jules Michelet had it, the heir of the Christian epoch?

Or was it in fact chiefly antimodern at its core? For intellectual history, the place of Enlightenment philosophy has always been hard to fix. One school of thought, spawned by Burke and De Maistre, has the Revolution as a natural product of the Enlightenment, thereby setting the stage to deplore both, while the Marxist-inspired historians explain events not as the result of ideas at all, but of those hoary impersonal forces.

For Americans and democrats everywhere, the comparative question remains lively: Next to the French Revolution, the American Revolution pales, giving rise to a predominantly liberal school of thought that argues that the American Revolution was not revolutionary at all but should be regarded as a mere War of Independence. (The next step in the argument, of course, is that America needs a genuine egalitarian revolution.)

And because of the similar phrasing of Jefferson's Declaration of Independence and the French Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen, many American conservatives argue that our Declaration is "tainted" by French influence and therefore not to be regarded as a vital part of the American tradition and certainly not to be accorded any theoretical authority.

There is finally the enormous popular legacy of the French Revolution. It is the standard by which other upheavals are measured. And this historical controversy over its nature has huge popular overtones, as was made evident by the furor that followed Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's denigration of the Revolution's significance. The French Revolution stands among the handful of historical moments fraught with contemporary importance.

So the historical debate has converged with the political debate. Indeed, it can be said that modern conservatism was generated out of the French Revolution, with Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* being the chief scripture right down to the present day. The Burkean critique is in one respect not necessarily helpful: Its ideological analysis provides ironic sanction to the liberal view that the French Revolution was a modernizing force and to the Marxist view that the Revolution was an important milestone on the Inevitable Course of History, in which bourgeois capitalism displaced relic feudalism. Many historians argue that it was neither of these, and they have to overcome Burke as well as the liberals and the Marxists.

Citizens addresses itself to all of these controversies, in a narrative form that provides interpretations as events unfold before the reader. Schama deliberately chooses the narrative form, because in recent historical inquiries "the causes of the French Revolution were depersonalized, cut loose from the speech and conduct of Great Men and instead located deep within the structure of the society that preceded it....Scientific—or at least sociological—history had arrived and with it, the demotion of chronicle to anecdotal unimportance." It is Schama's purpose to revive this style and yet still offer the reader broad conclusive themes.

Citizens comes down squarely on the side of the recent revisionists, such as François Furet, who see the French Revolution generally as a catastrophe proceeding from rather unremarkable political causes. Although a great many fac-