

# Le Carre's flawed perfection

### A Perfect Spy

By John le Carre  
Knopf, 479 pp., \$18.95

By Paul Skenazy

SOME TIME BACK, JOHN LE Carre started veering away from writing novels about spying to writing novels about spies. In his Smiley-Karla trilogy in particular (*Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy*; *The Honourable Schoolboy*; *Smiley's People*), he wrote less of the dangers of international intrigue than about the people caught in the complex cross-fire of national policy and personal loyalty: those who spend their lives, often at the cost of their souls, peeking at each other for love of country. He got derailed from those purposes a bit with *The Little Drummer Girl*—an intricate but somewhat leaden work about Israeli-Arab conflicts—but he's back in his home territory once again in *A Perfect Spy*.

*Spy* is a psychological thriller in which public issues of who knows what about whom are almost entirely displaced by one individual's quite private—indeed, secretive and illicit—attempt to find out about himself for the first time in his life. Magnus Pym is the "perfect" agent of the title: a suave, engaging, brilliant man who has lived his life charming friends, lovers, wives and even himself into believing that he reserves his lies only for others. As the story opens, Pym (renamed Canterbury) arrives at a boarding house in a south Devon town. Meanwhile, his wife Mary, back in Vienna where the family is posted, awaits Jack Brotherhood, Pym's commander and friend in the Firm (and Mary's former lover), who has come to figure out why Pym has mysteriously disappeared.

From there the story moves through alternating glimpses of Brotherhood and Mary, and of Pym. As Mary and Brotherhood frantically try to reconstruct Pym's motives and actions, Pym himself sits writing a lengthy memoir, addressed by turns to his son Tom and to Brotherhood. Interview by interview, Brotherhood learns of Pym's whereabouts before he disappeared, his calls of apology to friends, his last visit with his son at school. Brotherhood argues with the American spy network, defending Pym against charges of being a double agent. He hears of Pym's clandestine love affairs, his unreported meetings with strangers, his occasional drunken lapses.

### Easy deception

Pym writes of his migratory childhood, the two women who nurtured him and died young, his first spy work for Brotherhood while a peripatetic student in Bern (when he was responsible for the arrest of his crippled friend and neighbor, Axel). Behind both the disappearance and the autobiography, we learn, is the death of Rick,

Pym's notorious, unscrupulous father. When he hears of Rick's death, Pym exclaims, "I'm free," and after the funeral he disappears. Rick is both the secret shame of Pym's life and the source of Pym's own graceful ease as a deceiver. Pym sees his whole personality arising as a reaction to Rick: his skills as a con artist, his desperate need to please everyone he meets, his selflessness in search of identity and definition from others, his desire to become a "secret mover of life's events."

The reader see-saws back and forth between these stories, engulfed for a period in Pym's abundant memory, tense and charged

by Brotherhood's witty, threatening and confusing interrogations. Le Carre develops an extraordinarily dense portrait of post World War II England, as seen through the upper-middle-class male point of view. His control of period detail, and of the world of intrigue, is impeccable; the tone rarely slips, the invention never falters. A harsh irony undermines every aspect of British manners and pretension while a decent tone of forbearance maintains hints of the need to sustain some cultural commitment to traditional forms of propriety and common courtesy. (Low-level farce is reserved for the American spy networks.) We rush

from church services to extravagant parties, from outrageous confidence games to even more underhanded spy maneuvers. Everything seems to be noticed, everything seems to be of importance.

Sentence by sentence, *A Perfect Spy* is a near-perfect piece of writing. As a novel, however, the book collapses on itself. While the environment is convincing, most of the characters are not. Almost everyone but Pym is reduced to a monotonous one-note samba: Brotherhood to frustrated rage, Mary to a high-pitched hysteria, and so on. In Brotherhood's case, the portraiture is effective; in Mary's, it is part of that way le Carre has of creating



IN THESE TIMES MAY 14-20, 1986 13 women as non-adults, petulant creatures who live as male toys. Women who remind me of nothing so much as bad Hemingway.

The major problem of the book is the unresolved psychological confusion le Carre brings to his analysis of Pym. *Spy* is a personalization of politics, in which national issues and conflicts of ideas are reduced to private psychic needs. Pym's life is understood as the result of his unresolved childhood conflicts with Rick, which Pym the adult can only tentatively and temporarily control by adopting two alternate father-figure mentors: Jack Brotherhood, whom he ostensibly works for, and Axel, the man whom he betrays and later meets again as a Czechoslovakian agent. Rick's failed nurturing has left Pym sourceless, without a self; he has become a "shell," a "hermit crab," an invention of others. The secrets he gives his superiors are his gifts of love, offerings which might maintain his place in their affections. He exists only as long as he knows something someone else doesn't, but wants to; thus the perfect spy, imaged as a child seeking love from a loveless and self-aggrandizing series of fathers.

Le Carre structures his story around the Oedipal conflict between Rick and Pym. The continuing issues of Pym's dependence and conflict with superiors, and Pym's later emotional seduction by both Brotherhood and Axel, require that we accept this farfetched psychologizing. But despite the endless pages devoted to talk of Rick's life and of Pym's childhood, Rick remains a shadowy figure, whose magnetism must be accepted on faith. Pym is at once too complex and too simple a character for this kind of analysis to make sense.

### Mangled contradiction

At the same time, Pym's writing voice in his memoir is compelling, and the texture of his memory binds us to the England of his youth in a moving and powerful way. The rich wealth of language and cultural allusion tell of a man embedded in his times and society; the organizing principle of the plot tells another tale, of a man whose fate is determined from his earliest days by his father's flagrant lies. And Pym as a creation is mangled by these two contradictory interpretations.

Don't, however, mistake my arguments with *Spy* for disinterest. Le Carre is a brave, ambitious writer, always overreaching his skills in order to find out just what else is possible in the thriller form. Pym's memoir is a new, self-reflective departure for him: an effort to get inside the blood of a man encouraged to develop his criminality, and to make overt parallels between the spy and the novelist. Pym's double life of secrecy, duplicity and role-playing are like the multiple personalities of the writer. Both creatures nurture an emptiness that leaves them selfless and selfish, vulnerable yet above the grime, devoted while loveless, public when most hidden. Despite the length, despite the lapses and despite the fact that le Carre's own craft has for the moment outdone his psychological penetration, his curiosity about the void at the heart of imagination opens up a whole new world worth any spy's attention.

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Nicole Ferantiz

# MEDIA BEAT

## Hear No Evil

Gramm-Rudman-Hollings has given government agencies an excuse to further reduce public information. The Federal Communications Commission (FCC), which long has charged for every piece of paper citizens request from its files, has now decided it's too expensive even to print in the Federal Register anything more than a cryptic summary of notices of its forthcoming actions. That ought to save the FCC the expense of handling citizen input into the rulemaking process from anywhere but law firms that can afford to find the story behind the summary. At the FCC (1919 M St., NW, Washington, DC 20566), they're convinced no one will notice; they say they'll change only "if we hear some screams."

Meanwhile, Congress is considering eliminating its service of mailing proposed legislation to curious citizens for free. If you think the new pennypinching is merely an accident of budget austerity, then Donna Demac's *Keeping America Uninformed: Government Secrecy in the 80s* (Pilgrim Press) is for you. The book methodically charts a radical new direction in government information policy, that attempts to narrow public access and thus control the issues of political debate. The author details changes in everything from the production of statistics to national library resources to the shrinking of congressional oversight. Demac makes a damning case that bureaucratic finagling is undercutting the basic raw material for democratic process: public information. And if you need to count the ways that the administration has stepped on the freedom of the press recently by limiting access to information, check out the Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press checklist, "The Reagan Administration and the News Media," produced this March and available from 800 18th St., NW, #300, Washington, DC 20006.

## And Don't Forget, We're Paying for It

The cutback in citizen information doesn't mean a cutback in government PR. A Government Accounting Office (GAO) survey estimated that the cabinet and federal agencies spend about \$437 million dollars annually in public relations alone, and that's an estimate that many say doesn't even get you into the ballpark. The question, of course, is not just "how much," but "for what?" Last year when I researched the United States Information Agency's multimillion dollar adventure in new technologies to sell the administration's image—the retooling of propaganda into what is being called "public diplomacy"—the information officer eventually told me flat out that I had used enough of the government's public information services for a year, and he wouldn't hunt up any more facts for me. (The pressures of public diplomacy hardly leave time for idle chat; recall that the Voice of America aired a White House-written "editorial" "explaining" the Libyan bombing simultaneously with the bombing itself.) In this war for hearts and minds, the big money is, of course, in the military. The Pentagon runs, according to *Communications Watch*, an independent electronic media service provided by ex-FCC Commissioner Nicholas Johnson, "the largest media conglomerate in the world"; its staff of 1,000 spends \$100 million annually. Last week, the Defense Department premiered a new service. For the price of a phone call, you can dial up a recorded news summary, conveniently larded with "sound bites" of Defense Department officials, ready for taping. The news nuggets are not labelled; it's up to the radio or TV journalist to provide attribution. (And most would just as soon pretend they got the information themselves instead of from a "canned" PR service.) The service builds on precedent: the White House News Service's taxpayer-sponsored electronic news hotline. Now the truth according to the Pentagon is also only a dial tone away.

## A Business Like Any Other?

Broadcasting, Congress thought in 1934, was a very special kind of enterprise, because its product was information and because broadcasters transmit on a scarce resource owned by the public. The FCC's job was supposed to be to defend the public interest, something you'd be hard put to tell from Mark Fowler's FCC. At the National Association of Broadcasters meeting two weeks ago, Fowler finally came straight out and said it: broadcasters are not, for him, trustees of the public interest. "Trustees hold property for the care of another.... But you are *not* custodians.... Your calling is to the market, which is the people, and to the truth. You don't need, and shouldn't have, an FCC telling you how to run your business." Fowler's brashness got him applause, but not everyone is happy. Heavy trading in media properties has followed lifting of a rule requiring broadcast stations to be held a minimum of three years, spawning a submarket in dealmakers. (A few years ago there were only a handful, now there are more than 100. In the latest *Channels of Communication*, several of "Wall Street's Brat Pack" describe the million-dollar brokers' profits on the billion-dollar trading.) Some broadcasters hate the new merger-and-takeover game, fearing an unregulated free-for-all could ruin the game for everyone. Both Congressman Al Swift (D-WA) and FCC Commissioner James Quello are making noises that the three-year holding rule should come back. Quello said its repeal has attracted "a bunch of fast-buck artists"; the high-stakes trading, he argues, could destroy small media outlets and turn big ones into megamedia.

—Pat Aufderheide



# Hammer-lock rock

By Steve Perry

**P**ROFESSIONAL WRESTLING is everywhere. It's the subject of comic books (in fact, the character Hulk Hogan is owned by the Marvel Comics Group) and Saturday morning cartoons. It's featured in records and heavy-rotation MTV videos. Now it's even making its way into rock clubs.

However well music and wrestling may sell as a commercial package, it's hard to imagine a more cynical reflection on the significance of rock music. It's a disastrous equation for the music involved, partly because the liaison with wrestling caters to the worst instincts of the arena rock mentality (the kind of thinking that gave rise to witless, overstated cock-rock posturing, smoke pots and lasers; in short, style at the expense of substance). And more importantly, because it mixes moral drama of two very different kinds.

As Roland Bathes demonstrated in his 1957 essay, "The World of Wrestling," wrestling constructs a formalist drama of good vs. evil, replete with comic exaggeration and subtexts of transgression and punishment. In good wrestling, every gesture is transparently clear in meaning, and every moral crisis is black and white. The best music, on the other hand, lives in gray spaces—between classes, generations, ethnic groups and musical traditions. Rock was spawned by precisely those tensions, but more broadly, mystery and ambiguity have always been near the center of music. It approaches those things that cannot simply be spoken, that cannot be made transparently clear.

Besides justifying most of the claims ever made about contemporary rock as cynical, profiteering product, the association with wrestling presents one more way to circumvent the quality of mystery that makes music demanding and enriching, and makes it essentially a Pavlovian inducement. It's comparable to the wholesale use of rock music in consumer advertising.

The rock connection is just the tip of the iceberg, though. Wrestling is probably the dramatic form closest to the pulse of 1980s America. The immediate clarity of every gesture in wrestling has manifest appeal for an electronic age filled with microwave ovens, 60-second news updates and remote-control units that can move through the entire video cosmos in a matter of seconds. Wrestling appeals both to the information age's hunger for immediately accessible meaning and the computer age's taste for unambiguous binary codes (good/evil, win/lose, violation/retribution).

Politically, wrestling works neatly as metaphoric amplification and ideological justification of the present administration. Cowboy metaphors can only take you so far in explaining Reagan-think, but wrestling comes close to encapsulating his entire worldview. From wrestling to Rambo, you don't have to look far to see the depths of our current obsession with the body-as-weapon; the wrestler's hulking physique may indeed be the best paradigm for contemporary America.

## Palpable force

The notion of American might it encompasses is clear enough, but beyond that the wrestler's body tacitly underlines the view that palpable force is what makes the world go round. There's also the comic analogy between the burlesque of torturous wrestling holds and the burlesque of '80s-style superpower arms negotiations, which is what makes Frankie Goes to Hollywood's "Two Tribes" video so compelling. In both cases, viewers understand that the elaborate maneuvers are themselves the meaning of the event, and aren't necessarily related to any larger outcome.

In a more insidious way, the modern cult of the body that runs from Sylvester Stallone to Rowdy Roddy Piper to your neighborhood health club makes sense of many of the right wing's political claims. Whenever an entire people is sym-

bolically encapsulated in the image of a body—a metaphor that reached its apex in European fascism—ugly conclusions follow. Censorship claims like those put forward by the Parents' Music Resource Center become intelligible on quasi-nutritional grounds: just as we seek to outlaw known carcinogens, we are justified in outlawing moral pollutants of the national body (remember the exhortations about "the cancer of communism" in years past?).

Likewise, the rumblings about quarantining gays becomes doubly justified in this view, since quarantining not only protects the body from the physical virus of AIDS, but from the moral virus of homosexuality as well. The wrestling match itself effectively frames the terms of Reagan-think. In the first sentence of this passage from Barthes' essay on wrestling, try substituting "the Reagan administration" for "wrestling": "What is portrayed by wrestling is...an ideal understanding of things; it is the euphoria of men raised for a while above the constitutive ambiguity of everyday situations and placed before the panoramic view of a univocal Nature, in which signs at last correspond to causes, without obstacle, without evasion, without contradiction." Or, as candidate Reagan put it during the 1980 presidential campaign, "I believe that there *are* simple answers."

These connections struck me hardest while I was re-reading Barthes' essay a few days ago. On the first page I came across this descriptive passage, which could as easily have been written last week about the Libyan incursion and the media's treatment of it: "The public is completely uninterested in knowing whether the contest is rigged or not, and rightly so; it abandons itself to the primary virtue of the spectacle, which is to abolish all motives and all consequences: what matters is not what it thinks but what it sees."

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