

# Spies and sportswriters subjects for recent novels

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**John le Carre: "A Perfect Spy"**  
John le Carre is the definitive spy novelist of the past 25 years. In works like "The Spy Who Came In from the Cold" and "Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy," he has created a world of shadow, where very little is what it seems and where the only constants are duplicity and the venerable English agent George Smiley, le Carre's most compelling character. In his new novel, the semi-autobiographical "A Perfect Spy," le Carre leaves Smiley behind and wanders off his well-beaten path in

an attempt to deal with the true nature of espionage and deceit.

Unfortunately, le Carre isn't the only one who wanders. The novel does the same throughout its 475 pages. It tells the story of Magnus Pym, a senior member of "The Firm" of British intelligence who runs agents in Czechoslovakia from his post in Vienna until one day he vanishes. But le Carre is not content to tell Pym's story from one viewpoint. Instead, the story proceeds on two different yet parallel levels, and as a result is neither as gripping nor as believable as it might have been.

The first level is the mad search

for Pym after his disappearance, a search conducted by both sides of the Iron Curtain. This is relatively run-of-the-mill stuff and serves to introduce those around Pym and to show the perfect spy through the eyes of his friends and colleagues. This is interesting but is passionless and sparkles only when Pym's wife is on the stage.

The second level is vastly more intriguing, for it is really the story of the "perfect spy," told by Pym in a letter to his son Tom and in a letter to one of his two great mentors. Through these letters, we come to know Magnus Pym. His life is shaped and dominated by

three great authority figures, all of whom are supposed to be larger than life. His childhood is dominated by the figure of his father, a con man who leaps from sting to sting with no thought of the future, who is able to command the utmost in loyalty and has no compunction about exploiting it, a man for whom deception is life itself.

From his father, Pym bounces toward Jack Brotherhood, an English agent who begins to mold Pym while he is caught in Switzerland by the failure of one of his father's infinite schemes. It is Brotherhood who subtly, yet lastingly, drops Pym on the road toward espionage by leading him to commit his first and most devastating betrayal. And it is Brotherhood, ironically, who pushes Pym to the other side, into the arms of his final mentor, a man who recognizes that Pym is in fact the perfect spy and uses that recognition to his advantage.

In certain ways, the novel works on this level. The whole metafictional notion of a book within a book that is the picture of le Carre as Pym, is very appealing. And the way this perfect spy's character is fleshed out bit by bit through the letters is fascinating.

At the same time, the development of Pym's personality is simply too overt, too crude and therefore out of place in his world, a world seemingly obsessed with subtlety. Le Carre leaves no questions about Pym, no room for this man's self. Instead the reader is hit over the head with how Pym was destined to be a spy, how his father's actions and those of his mentors created a man for whom deceit and espionage became not second, but first, nature. That makes Pym's ability to reconcile the two diverse strands of his adult existence believable.

But the fact that Pym is depicted as a mere artifact, someone sculpted out of the raw material of youth with no say in the matter until he rebels at the end, makes le Carre's description of him as a terribly impressive man, a man with charm, wit and incisiveness, a quite simply unconvincing portrait.

More disturbingly, the entire "love is betrayal" theme comes from out of left field. It is as if le Carre wanted the story to tell the theme but couldn't figure out how to do it, so he had the characters say it constantly. And so frustratingly, by the end the reader feels only as if a grand opportunity has been missed.

Richard Ford: "The Sportswriter"

"The Sportswriter" is a brilliant new novel by Richard Ford which has far less to do with sports than it does with life. The novel's hero is Frank Bascombe, a 38-year-old divorced sportswriter, who has two kids and an ex-wife whom he refers to only as "X." Bascombe is the rarest of characters in modern fiction, for he is a good man facing a hard-nosed world with a tempered optimism and a willingness to see what is right in others.

But Bascombe's optimism is not of the rose-colored glasses variety, proceeding instead from a deeper faith in the value of this world and in what people make of it. After years of self-pitying, pessimistic anti-heroes, it is a tremendous pleasure to meet Frank Bascombe. In a strange way, he is an existentialist who has decided that existence isn't so bad, and, as he says near the end of the novel, sometimes one can look around and "suddenly feel pretty good."

The novel is, in the most superficial sense, the tale of what happens to Bascombe over an Easter week, right before he turns 39. And, indeed, a lot happens. The reader sees his fight with his girlfriend after an Easter dinner at her house, his usual battles with his ex-wife, and a touching exchange with his son outside his old house. There is a trip to Detroit to interview a former football player now confined to a wheelchair which is one of the most powerful sequences in the novel.

These are the events that define Bascombe's existence, and one of the points of the novel is that they aren't very different from those that define everyone's existence. The difference comes not from the events, but from how one approaches them, how one deals with the problems which make us human.

There are no punches pulled in what happens to Bascombe, and he bounces from jubilation to mourning and back again. But this very uncertainty is part of what makes life, and this novel, so damn exhilarating and so good when done right. Ford is a terrific writer, with an expert eye for dialogue and for the nuances of today's America. This is a marvelous novel, full of life and exuberance. Read it at all costs.

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