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John le Carré: An Interrogation

By MICHAEL BARBER

ALTHOUGH he still regards big cities as "occupied territory," John le Carré has decided for private and professional reasons to try to build a London life for himself and his family. We talked in the study of his house in Hampstead. On the wall beside his desk he has scribbled these lines by Hippocrates: "Whoever does not reach the capacity of common people and fails to make them listen misses the mark."

Q. Mr. le Carré, you once pointed out that spies spent a lot of their time pretending to be characters "outside of themselves." Isn't there an obvious analogy here with writers?

A. Yes. I've certainly drawn that parallel in my own mind. It's part of a writer's profession, as it's part of a spy's profession, to prey on the community to which he's attached, to take away information—often in secret—and to translate that into intelligence for his masters, whether it's his readership or his spy masters. And I think that both professions are perhaps rather lonely.

Q. Would you also agree that both thrive on tension?

A. Well, certainly I don't think that there are

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very many good writers who don't live without a sense of tension. If they haven't got one immediately available to them, then they usually manage to manufacture it in their private lives. But I think the real tension lies in the relationship between what you might call the pursuer and his quarry, whether it's the writer or the spy. Graham Greene once referred to a chip of ice that has to be in the writer's heart. And that is the strain: that you must abstain from relationships and yet at the same time engage in them. There you have, I think, the real metaphysical relationship between the writer and the spy.

Q. I think Eric Ambler once said that there is a criminal and a policeman in all of us, and that this could account for the popularity of spy fiction and allied genres. Would you agree?

A. I think there's something much more fundamental at work at the moment. We have learned in recent years to translate almost all of political life in terms of conspiracy. And the spy novel, as never before, really, has come into its own. There is so much cynicism about the orthodox forms of government as they are offered to the public that we believe almost nothing at its face value. Now, somehow or other the politicians try to convey to us that this suspicion is misplaced. But we know better than that. And until we have a better relationship between private performance and the public truth, as was demonstrated with Watergate, we as the public are

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absolutely right to remain suspicious, contemptuous even, of the secrecy and the misinformation which is the digest of our news. So I think that the spy novel encapsulates this public wariness. And I think also, in entertainment terms, it makes a kind of fable about forces that we do believe in the West are stacked against us.

Q. Is it true that you once compared writing your novels to making a jam roll? You open the pastry out, spread the jam and then roll it up.

A. Well, if I did, I'm already beginning to regret it, but I think as rough principle I always begin with one character and then perhaps two, and they seem to be in conflict with each other. "The cat sat on the mat" is not a story. "The cat sat on the dog's mat" is a story. And I have a sense of atmosphere, the environment in which I want to set them, and a sense of how the ending will be. From there the story takes over by itself. But the layer cake you refer to—yes, I like to lead the story forward, and therefore the reader forward, on a whole variety of levels, and try to make all these levels then converge and pay off at the end.

Q. So rather than impose a plot on your characters, you follow Scott Fitzgerald's dictum that character is action?

A. Very much so. For instance, in "The Honourable Schoolboy," I began with two basic characters. George Smiley, who's a constant companion in these books, and then somebody who now takes a major role—that's Jerry Westerby. I had planted in Jerry's past in the previous book the fact that he had a Far Eastern background. So, I set off for the Far East with those two people and a rough idea of the evanescence of the Western presence in Southeast Asia; beyond that, I felt, I had no preconceptions. I found myself referring to Jerry and George as "my secret sharers." So it was an act of complicity, I suppose, between myself and the characters, that we finally drew the story out of their motivation.

Q. Was Jerry's Far Eastern background a happy accident?

A. No, it was what you might call an inspired accident. In laying the foundations of some of these minor characters I've tried always to give them such

a variety of qualifications that I could pick them up later if I wanted to—by actually pulling their card out of a card index that I keep—and then perhaps turn them from two-dimensional characters into three-dimensional characters. I knew toward the end of "Tinker, Tailor" that I wanted a change of scene. And I think that by scribbling in those few lines that Jerry was an old Asian hand and so on I was setting that up for myself later. But I loved him as a character in "Tinker, Tailor"; just the few pages I gave him, I thought he was a winner.

Q. I was very struck by the way your Chinese speak English in "The Honourable Schoolboy." You must have an excellent ear for idiom.

A. I believe that is something I do have. I think I was born with two—for a writer—lucky skills. One is a very good ear for voice and also a very retentive ear, so that I can recall



John le Carré.

Photograph by Andreas Heumann

both accent and words for a long time afterwards. And the other is a wary retention of certain detail—topography, rooms, furniture and so on.

Q. Are you a good mimic?

A. It's said of me, yes. And I am a linguist, which helps.

Q. Has this had any effect on your style?

A. I think it certainly has. More particularly, having a largely German-oriented education has made me very responsive to 19th-century German literature. The predominant form of the lately emerging novel in Germany then was what they called the *Bildungsroman*, a novel of education, in which a single character was taken through a variety of rooms, as you might say—a variety of encounters and experiences—and brought out at the other end a changed and generally morally reformed figure. If that didn't happen, there was an apocalypse of some kind and he was destroyed. I

think that, to a great extent, that form is something I've clung to in my own novels. Generally speaking, they are finally about one person.

Q. I think you've acknowledged that you sell far better in Europe and America than in Britain. Yet unlike some English writers one could name, you make no concessions to foreign readers. Indeed, your delight in our esoteric social institutions seems almost provocative.

A. Yes, the question of the Englishness of my books and their exportability fascinates me too, and I've come up with no real solution to it. Funnily enough, I had my French translator on the phone only this morning asking me to explain various cricketing terms I'd used. The only explanation I could offer was to refer back to the classical form of the detective story, the country-house scene, Hercule Poirot pointing to the suspect and so on. Eng-

used, are pure gold, in my experience.

Q. Was the Circus always going to be a constant in your novels?

A. Not at the beginning. But then as I became more ambitious, I thought that it would in time work itself into a very beautiful microcosm of English behavior and English society altogether.

Q. So when, in "The Honourable Schoolboy," Smiley says that the Circus must stir itself because "Not to produce was not to trade, and not to trade was to die," you wanted to make a point about Britain today?

A. Yes, that was exactly the analogy I tried to make. It's very dangerous to talk of one's symbolism, but I felt that at the end of "Tinker, Tailor" I had shown a Secret Service totally betrayed and in pieces on the floor. At the beginning of "The Honourable Schoolboy" in comes Smiley to sweep up the stable and get things going. And he has to breathe vigor into a completely dismayed and disoriented and poorly equipped outfit. The parallels between our economy and the English "cafard," and what was going on in the Circus and what Smiley was trying to get on the move—they were irresistible to me.

Q. Is it true that the C.I.A. has adopted some of your Circus jargon — lamplighters, scalp-hunters, etc.?

A. I'm told that they've definitely adopted the word "mole" for what they used to call a "sleeper," which is a long-term penetration agent who does nothing until he's activated. It may be that they also use other expressions that have appeared in my books. If so, I'm flattered.

Q. Up until "The Honourable Schoolboy," all your books had been set in Britain or Europe. Why the shift to Southeast Asia?

A. Well, I'd never seen war—Southeast Asia was the area of conflict. And for better or worse, I've been involved in the description of political conflict. Also, I was very aware of a feeling of professional menopause. I felt that I needed new horizons for my own self as well as my work. And it was a wonderful challenge to take on a completely new theater of life and experience and try to fit it into fictional form.

Q. When did you first realize that you had a book on your hands?

A. When we hit Hong Kong. I knew then that I could exploit

that last colony—"Borrowed Time, Borrowed Place," as Richard Hughes called it with his book—and make it a point of reference if I was going to step out into the exotica of Cambodia and Laos and Vietnam. I think a sense of manners towards the reader intervenes here. I believe it's possible to be too exotic in a novel to the point where the Western, round-eyed reader is simply lost, where his standard of comparison is taken away from him. And Hong Kong was a kind of halfway house. When Jerry was in Hong Kong, you knew that in a way he was at least putting one foot back in the world of Western manners.

Q. You referred earlier to the "evanescence of the Western presence in Southeast Asia." Presumably you had a ringside seat at this?

A. Yes, that immediately became apparent. I realized that if I was going to set my book in Southeast Asia, it was already certain to be a historical novel. And when I left Phnom Penh—when Jerry left Phnom Penh—we had the feeling that we would never return.

Q. When you took Richard Hughes and turned him into old Craw, did you realize that he'd already appeared as Dikko Henderson in Fleming's "You Only Live Twice"?

A. Yes, but only after I'd written to him about my own plans. I said, "I propose to libel you in my book. I'm going to have an old and not completely abstemious Australian journalist at the center. Do you mind?" He wrote back and said, "My boy, libel me to the hilt," and then reminded me that Fleming had done the same.

Q. In your early novels you seemed to imply that no society was worth defending by the kind of methods you had set out to expose. Have your opinions hardened since then?

A. I think they have. I don't know whether it's age or maturity, but I certainly find myself committed more and more to the looser forms of Western democracy at any price. And I've become more and more disenchanted about the possibility of understanding the Soviet Union as it's constructed at the moment. So what I suppose I would wish to see is the cleaning of our own stable and the proper organization, as I understand it, and the sanitation, of the things that we stand for. I hope by that means and by those examples perhaps to avoid what I regard as so wrong with the Soviet Union. ■