

John le Carré never won the Booker – but then he preferred it out in the cold

Simon Jenkins



- 1 John le Carré never won the Booker prize. His genre – a mix of espionage and detective thriller – wasn't always in literary fashion even though it was hugely popular, selling some 60m copies. Le Carré refused to let his work be entered into literary prizes, though he did in his early career and in recent years has been recognised with honours such as the prestigious Olof Palme award. The complexity and deftness of his narratives left the illusion, for some, that they somehow skimmed the surface of life. That plots overwhelmed his characters' depth of personality.
- 2 To anyone reading 'Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy', 'Smiley's People', 'A Perfect Spy' or the recent Smiley retrospective, 'A Legacy of Spies', this is absurd. I cannot think of a novelist who intruded so utterly into the psychology of their subject's profession as did le Carré, whose real name was David Cornwell. Each of the characters in 'Tinker Tailor' was dismembered, frailties exposed, as was the father-and-son relationship – so close to Cornwell's own – in 'A Perfect Spy'. A former spy himself, he was able to penetrate the balance between personal ambition, loyalty to colleagues and duty to principle that afflicts any career. *Private Eye* might tease him as John le Carry-on-trying-to-write-the-great-British-novel, but in a sense this was an acknowledgement that he succeeded.
- 3 Le Carré probably also suffered from the television celebrity of his hero, George Smiley, in the person of the actor Alec Guinness. If le Carré was Smiley to many, so too was Guinness. His semi-retirement, his world-weary face, misted-over glasses and sardonic comments on his introverted world placed him among the seminal characters of post-war fiction. He emerged from the screen as much as from le Carré's pages as embodying the wretched later years of the cold war.

- 4 In his 2018 study of the Smiley novels, the critic Toby Manning points to how the cold war's ideological conflict, so central to the world le Carré dramatised, is "elided, submerged, repressed" in his novels. For Smiley the west's superiority lay not in ideas but in "the man". He declares in 'The Secret Pilgrim', "I never gave a fig for the ideologies ... *Man*, not the mass, is what our calling is about ... It was man who ended the cold war." By that he meant the people of "our sworn enemy", who went into the streets, bravely confronted guns and batons and won.
- 5 Any novelist writing about contemporary politics can swiftly seem out of date. It was a measure of le Carré's breadth that he could turn from cold war to new war, to the evils of big pharma, the arms trade and terrorism – though never with the same panache as espionage. Perhaps herein lay his only shortcoming. While he dissected what he saw as the moral dubiety of his calling, he did not 39. It was always spies doing each other down, endlessly. We are left to suspect for ourselves that their profession's part in "winning" the cold war was trivial, irrelevant. That should have been Smiley's last stand.
- 6 40, if ever there was a case for a posthumous Booker prize, le Carré it is.

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