

The Tourist Trilogy: The New Genre?

Olen Steinhauer, *An American Spy* (New York: Minotaur, 2012), 386 pp.

———, *The Tourist* (New York: Minotaur, 2009), paperback, 408 pp.

———, *The Nearest Exit* (New York: Minotaur, 2010), paperback, 404 pp.

Reviewed by John Ehrman

A wise critic once observed that the worst thing that could happen to a rising rock musician was to be hailed as the next Bob Dylan. Almost invariably, the subjects of such praise soon fade into obscurity and the publicists begin hunting for the next prodigy/victim. So it is, too, in the world of espionage novels. Since the end of the Cold War, reviewers have searched for a new writer to inherit the mantles of Graham Greene, Len Deighton, and John le Carré as the new master of the espionage genre, and all have fallen short. (Has it been only four years since a *Washington Post* reviewer told us that Joseph Weisberg's now-forgotten *An Ordinary Spy* "recalls Graham Greene"?)^a Now the critics have settled on a new candidate, Olen Steinhauer, who has completed three novels focusing on the next ostensible spy for our times, Milo Weaver. "Not since John Le Carré," the *New York Times* declares, "has a writer so vividly evoked the multilayered, multifaceted, deeply paranoid world of espionage."^b Great praise, indeed.

At the same time, however, this praise has a definite backward-looking tone. The classic Cold War espionage novels appeared in a comparatively brief period, starting in the early 1960s and petering out, roughly, in the mid-1980s. This era stretched from Deighton's *The Ipcress File* (1962) and le Carré's *The Spy Who Came in From the Cold* (1963), through le Carré's *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy* (1973) and

Greene's *The Human Factor* (1978), and then ended with Deighton's *Game, Set, and Match* trilogy (1983–85). The fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union marked the definite end of that period. Deighton published espionage fiction in the 1990s and le Carré still soldiers on, but no espionage writer today—not even David Ignatius or Alan Furst—has matched the combination of literary quality, wit, and political sophistication that came from working when the Cold War seemed destined to go on forever. Indeed, one could easily conclude that it has been almost 30 years since an espionage novel has reached classic status.

The Cold War espionage novel did not appear out of nowhere, fully formed, in 1962. As we know it, the genre comes from England, where it took form in the early 1900s. This was a period of political anxiety and then war, and it produced such pioneering works as Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent* (1907) and John Buchan's *The Thirty-Nine Steps* (1915).^c The spy novel continued to develop in the interwar period, led by the work of another British writer, Eric Ambler. The hallmark of these novels is their focus on the innocent amateur, usually someone caught up in events or a plot that he does not understand. This, in turn, reflects the pre-World War II intelligence world—one of small services that were bureaucratically and professionally much less developed than

^a *An Ordinary Spy* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2008). See John Ehrman review in *Studies in Intelligence* 52, no. 4 (December 2008).

^b Ben MacIntyre, "Pawn's Move," in *New York Times Book Review*, 1 April 2012: 9.

^c For a discussion of such works in the United Kingdom see Dr. Christopher R. Moran and Dr. Robert Johnson "In the Service of Empire: Imperialism and the British Spy Thriller, 1901–1914" in *Studies in Intelligence* 54, No. 2 (June 2010).

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they would be after the war. Even as the amateur hero gave way in the popular imagination to James Bond, however, the older framework lived on in film. Two of Alfred Hitchcock's best movies, *The Man Who Knew Too Much* (1956) and *North by Northwest* (1958), carried on the theme of the innocent swept up in events.

Then, suddenly, the genre changed dramatically. The major authors continued to be exclusively British, but overnight, the amateurs and the fantasies of Bond disappeared, replaced by a completely different protagonist. Deighton's nameless hero (later given the name Harry Palmer in the movie versions of his books) and Bernard Samson, le Carré's George Smiley and Control, and Adam Hall's Quiller were professional intelligence officers with experience going back to the war or earlier. They now worked for modern, faceless bureaucracies—Palmer's W.O.O.C. (P), Smiley's Circus, Samson's Department—which are, in turn, enmeshed in larger political games. At the same time, the heroes are alienated from these organizations and their politics. Rather than promote their own careers and play the games necessary to advance in rank, they focus on seeing through the dangerous assignments they are given. Thus, says le Carré about Alec Leamas, in *The Spy Who Came in From the Cold*: "You might as well have asked a jockey to become a betting clerk as expect Leamas to abandon operational life for the tendentious theorizing and clandestine self-interest of Whitehall." Their alienation, of course, is reinforced by the knowledge that, even as they go about their work, they have not been told the entire story or plan. They are pawns to be manipulated and betrayal is routine, as Leamas learns at the end—"Suddenly, with the terrible clarity of a man too long deceived, Leamas understood the whole ghastly trick."

Even as British authors continued to dominate the espionage genre, however, a distinctly American influence crept in. Anyone reading about Palmer, Smiley, Quiller, or Samson can recognize their predecessors in the American hard-boiled detectives of the 1920s and onward—Dashiell Hammett's Sam Spade and Continental Op, Raymond Chandler's Philip Marlowe, and Ross Macdonald's Lew Archer. These were tough and honest men, relentless in their hunt for the truth amidst corruption, and unable to accept higher authority. The plots, too, are the same. The lone operative, given a puzzling assignment, perseveres despite betrayals and orders to back off. He could be Marlowe in *The Big Sleep* (1939) or Palmer in *Ipcress*.

Where the American idiom goes, sex and violence are sure to follow. Women either have secondary roles in the male environment of the hard-boiled detective, like Spade's loyal secretary, Effie Perine, or are cast as lying and manipulative schemers, like Marlowe's clients, the Sternwood sisters. So it is when the setting shifts across the Atlantic. Palmer has his secretary and girlfriend Jean, but Smiley suffers through his marriage to the serially unfaithful Lady Anne, with whom the traitor Bill Haydon carries on an affair to throw him off track. The threat of violence, too, is omnipresent, though the detectives never seek it out or become willing killers. Instead, they prefer to bring down the villains by applying intelligence to outmaneuver them—for example, Sam Spade sets out to avenge his partner's death, but he kills no one. The same goes for the spies. Smiley tracks down the traitor and eventually turns Karla, the chief of Soviet counterintelligence, without violence; Palmer kills, but reluctantly and in self-defense.

The American influence also brought a new sense of self-awareness to the spy novel. The detectives had seen themselves as men of honor, able to live in a corrupt world only because they followed a stern code. "When a man's partner is killed, he's supposed to do something about it," Spade famously tells Brigid O'Shaughnessy. "It doesn't make any difference what you thought of him. He was your partner and you're supposed to do something about it." Transplanted to the Cold War, the individual code survived but was joined by an ambivalent political and ideological consciousness. Le Carré developed this to the highest level, and his novels are well noted for their atmospherics of decline and decay, reflecting England's postwar deterioration. "The political posture of the United Kingdom is without relevance or moral viability in world affairs," the traitor Haydon tells Smiley at the end of *Tinker, Tailor*. "Smiley might, in other circumstances, have agreed; it was the tone, rather than the music, that alienated him." Nonetheless, Smiley stands out as the last "illusionless man," in Haydon's words and, having caught the traitor, gives up his retirement to return to the Circus and rebuild it. Two books later, in *Smiley's People* (1979), he deals a decisive blow against Soviet counterintelligence by forcing Karla to defect, and one can almost hear Sam Spade applauding Smiley for having done something about Haydon's treason.

For ideological commentary, it is hard to top Greene. As Maurice Castle, the English intelligence

officer who is a Soviet mole, prepares to flee to Moscow, he is assisted by an English communist, Halliday. Castle, who spied for personal reasons, not ideology, knows that his life in Moscow will be lonely and dreary, and he is unenthusiastic about his defection, but Halliday, who never has been to Moscow, stands firmly by the vision of it as a paradise. “Oh, well, I tell myself when I’m feeling low, Marx never knew Moscow either.” Halliday is a man of illusions, but in Greene’s telling, both he and Castle are tragic characters.

This is what it means to inherit the legacy of Deighton, le Carré, or Greene. Their works are marked by irony and a sense of tragedy, but their characters have enough depth so they never veer into self-pity, nihilism, or other forms of self-destruction. This combination allows the authors to have something worthwhile to say about politics, society, and the human condition without sounding preachy or obvious. To be their heir is a large burden to bear, for the ambitious espionage writer cannot be simply a storyteller, content to entertain, but will be called on to do much more. This, then, brings us to the core question: does Steinhauer measure up?



Steinhauer’s trilogy tells us that there exists a supersecret CIA component, the Department of Tourism. Based in an office building in Manhattan, the Department oversees some three dozen officers—so-called Tourists, of whom Milo Weaver is one—who roam the world, using advanced tradecraft and ever-changing identities to carry out their orders, which usually involve assassinations and other mayhem, rather than anything resembling actual intelligence collection. Tourists are expected to carry out their orders without question, regardless of how brutal or seemingly pointless they might be, and the plot of the three books revolves around the unintended consequences of one of their missions. As part of a plan to reduce Chinese influence in the Sudan, a Tourist assassinates a local leader and, in the riots that follow, a young Chinese man is killed. He turns out to be the son of Xin Zhu, a Chinese master spy, and in the second book, Zhu takes his revenge by penetrating the Tourists’ communications and sending them on missions to kill one another. Only a few, including Weaver, survive. The third volume revolves around a complex game of revenge-seeking by the surviving Tourists while Zhu searches for a CIA mole in Beijing.

All of this, of course, is far more complicated than a brief summary can suggest. As pure entertainment, these three books are terrific reads. Steinhauer certainly knows how to tell a tale, the action moves along quickly, and the twists keep the reader wondering what’s next and how it all will work out. None of these books is easy to put down. They are all great vacation reading.

Much of the reason the books succeed is that they fit comfortably into the framework of the Cold War espionage novel. Steinhauer is not out to reinvent the genre or challenge his readers but, instead, to give

them exactly what they are used to and enjoy. Corrupt politicians, bureaucratic snakes, and treachery from within are all present, as expected. With Zhu, we get an up-to-the-minute adversary, playing to current anxieties just as vengeful Nazis did in *The Quiller Memorandum* (1965). Steinhauer gives us his comments on the world, and Milo—disillusioned and exhausted—wants to leave the brutality of Tourism so he can spend time with his family but is manipulated back into the battle against Zhu. The reader is on familiar and comfortable ground.

As enjoyable as the books are, however, once we start looking at them closely, their flaws become all too apparent. The stories are improbably and needlessly elaborate, with the main plots surrounded by a web of subplots that come and go. Sometimes these are resolved and sometimes not, and they bring with them a large supporting cast of minor characters who also drop in and out of the story. Much of this is just complication for its own sake, and many of the characters are little more than stock figures. Women, except for Milo’s wife, are cardboard figures that seem to come from the central casting office of spy novels—the brilliant but eccentric, obese, and alcoholic Erika from German counterintelligence, a Chinese seductress, or the brilliant, beautiful, and flashy Tourist, Leticia. None of them is like Lady Anne, who exercised a profound influence on Smiley even though she was always offstage. The atmospherics, too, are superficial. Except for the details of Budapest, where Steinhauer lives, the descriptions of cities are perfunctory, as if he had dropped into each just long enough to be able to say what street the side entrance of a hotel is on. Steinhauer fails to evoke the types of settings that le Carré, Hall, and Deighton mastered, or to match

their ability to give the flavor of a country in just a couple of sentences.

Nonetheless, Steinhauer tries, from time to time, to force his readers to question their conception of America. He shows no benevolence toward the United States, its power, or its policies. Instead, Steinhauer tells us, the United States is aggressive and resorts to overwhelming violence the instant it is challenged. "We've been marking our territory like an imperial dog since the end of the last big war," says Milo's boss in *The Tourist*. "Since 9/11, we no longer have to go about it sweetly. We can bomb and maim and torture to our heart's content, because only the terrorists are willing to stand up to us, and their opinion doesn't matter." (273) Steinhauer amplifies this point in *An American Spy*. "Americans still think it's possible to have a society in which a level of civility is constant, where a perfect balance of control and freedom can be maintained. It's quaint," says Milo's father. But, he continues, "When a small band of desert lunatics brings down two enormous buildings...the country lashes out. It snaps...God help anyone standing in its path." (183) This point of view explains the behavior of the Tourists, for they and their relentless killing are but one tool that Washington uses in its never-ceasing quest for world domination. Steinhauer wants us to believe that Milo and his colleagues are typical Americans, shooting first and not bothering to ask questions later.

This is hardly an original or convincing argument. Casting the United States as a malign influence with a cowboy mentality is cliché, not insight, and Steinhauer makes the point with such certainty and simplicity that it sounds like something written by an undergraduate who has just learned that the world is a complex, unhappy place rather than the rational arena he had expected. Some evil influence must be causing this, and the United States's prominence in world affairs means that it must be to blame.

Another problem is Milo himself, who is too implausible a character on which to build a sophisticated analysis of anything. Milo's father, we are told, was a KGB officer who took up with an American 1960s radical who had fled to West Germany and later committed suicide. Raised until his teens in the USSR, Milo speaks perfect Russian, and his father, now running a secret intelligence agency within the United Nations, is essentially on call to come to his son's rescue, even as Milo debates the conflicts within their relationship. It's a good thing that Milo has a guardian angel, however, for in the

course of the trilogy, he is beaten, tortured, and shot (twice). Through it all, he soldiers on, trying to get through his missions so he can return to his wife (a brainy Columbia University librarian), her daughter (don't ask, it's complicated), and their quiet domestic life in Park Slope. No cliché is too great for Steinhauer to drape over Milo's shoulders, and by the middle of the second book it is hard to take Milo, or anything Steinhauer says through him, seriously.

One aspect of Milo has to be considered carefully, however, and that is his identity as a Tourist. He is a cold-blooded professional killer, and only once does he go against his orders—told to kidnap and kill a young girl, he kidnaps her and hands her over to others for hiding. Someone else eventually kills her, but Milo convinces himself that his hands are clean. This is only one example of how Milo adroitly manages to compartmentalize his life, separating the killer from the good family man. In giving Milo this skill, Steinhauer is trying to present him as a complex character, but the effort fails because Milo himself is not very reflective and has little to say. Except for wondering how the rather uninteresting Milo will escape from various dangers, it is hard for the reader to care about such a vicious man or his fate.

In one sense, however, the idea of the Tourist gives Steinhauer something new to say. The novels of Deighton, le Carré, and the other masters certainly had their share of evil characters, but the good guy was never one of them. Steinhauer's contribution to the genre seems to be to push the intelligence officer over that line by turning him into a serial killer, while still casting him as the hero of the tale. Perhaps because of Milo's conflicted nature and love for his family, we are supposed to look past that. Or, alternatively, perhaps we are supposed to believe that intelligence officers, despite their civilized veneers, are just psychotic killers in the service of imperialism. Whatever the intended point, there is nothing multilayered or multifaceted here. It's just silliness.

Maybe all is not lost for spy novelists, however. It took about 15 years from the start of the Cold War for the genre to shift to its classic mode, and it's only been a little more than a decade since 9/11 upended our world. Writers are still adjusting to the new era and will at some point find a voice that resonates, one that will speak through a new Palmer or Smiley, but Steinhauer's books thus far suggest that voice will not be Milo Weaver's.

