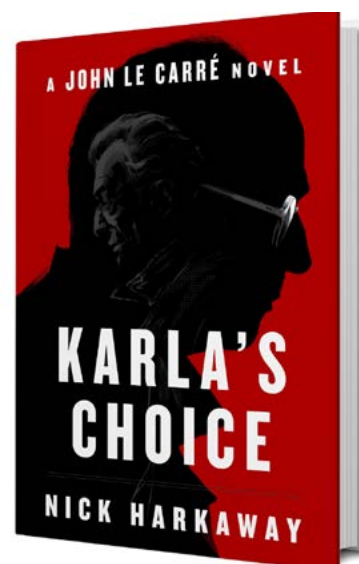


# intelligence in public media

## Karla's Choice

Reviewed by David Robarge

**Author:** Nick Harkaway  
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**Reviewer:** The reviewer is CIA's chief historian.



John le Carré has remained a prominent figure in the publishing world since his death in December 2020 by the release of *Silverview*, a novel his son Nick Cornwell completed; a massive collection of his correspondence edited by his son Timothy, *A Private Spy*; and examinations of his libidinous private side in *The Secret Life of John le Carré* by his biographer, Adam Sisman, and *The Secret Heart* by a former lover, Suleika Dawson. Then, at the importuning of his family, Nick—already a noted author of fantasy and futurism stories under the pen surname Harkaway—agreed to write a continuation novel about le Carré's best known protagonist, British counter-intelligence officer George Smiley. Although daunting, it was in many ways a labor of love because, as Harkaway writes in his Author's Note, "I grew up with George. His presence, in various forms, was a friendly ghost at my table..." He listened to audio recordings of the Smiley

canon and saw the film portrayals of him by Denholm Elliott, Alec Guinness, and Gary Oldman, "and all of them echoed in my ears as I sat down to see whether I could fit some sort of story into that ten-year gap between *The Spy Who Came In from the Cold* and *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy*. It was as if Smiley was there, waiting patiently, and I was slightly late. If you're quite prepared, Nicholas, we may begin." (xi-xii)

*Karla's Choice* takes place in 1963, filling in part of the time between *Spy* (1962) and *Tinker Tailor* (the early 1970s). Smiley has left the Circus—le Carré's fictionalized MI6—outraged and guilt-stricken at the loss of agent runner Alec Leamas in the botched WINDFALL operation recounted in *Spy* and given that codename in *A Legacy of Spies*, published in 2017. He is enjoying his quiet retirement reading and reconnecting with his faithless

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wife, Lady Ann Sercomb—he “lived between libraries and love, and came as close to contentment as a man of his peculiar constitution is able” (26)—when the head of the Circus, known cryptically as Control (a clever allusion to MI6’s tradition of referring to its chief simply as “C”), dispatches an officer to persuade Smiley to return and help with a thorny case that has just arisen. A Hungarian literary agent in London named Laszlo Bánáti has disappeared, and a KGB assassin sent to kill him has declined to do the deed and defected to the Circus. Control wants to know who Bánáti is and why the Soviets want him dead, and entrusts the mission to a reluctant Smiley, who sets the terms of his engagement in the aftermath of WINDFALL—what Control snidely calls “the Smiley way,” but which George retorts is “just decency.” After being trapped into accepting the assignment, Control directs him, “Then do that, George. Go and be decent, and maybe we’ll all learn something.” (63)

Smiley then enlists Bánáti’s assistant, a young Hungarian émigré named Susanna Gero, to help track him down. She proves to be a natural at the spy business and also to possess a powerful streak of independence and courage. Along the way other familiar le Carré personalities appear: Soviet operations expert and arrogant lecher Bill Haydon; Toby Esterhase, head of technical services and another Hungarian whose occasionally fractured English is entertainingly rendered; Connie Sachs, the brilliant but besotted head of research; Peter Guillam, a case officer and more junior member of the Circus now working as a NOC in Germany; Oliver Mendel, a Scotland Yard Special Branch inspector who helps the Circus occasionally with security and investigative tasks; Sam Collins, working under cover as a Parisian nightclub owner; Jim Prideaux, resident agent in Prague; and others who become more familiar in later novels but here appear only briefly, such as Roy Bland and Percy Alleline.

Harkaway introduces some new characters—Tom Lake, a strapping former paramilitary officer; the Bad Aunts, “a brain trust dedicated to answering questions which would stump more conventional analysis” but “who couldn’t get ‘properly cleared’” and had to work in an outbuilding away from Circus headquarters (107–8); and a duplicitous interior designer *cum* forger

named Raghuraman Vishwakarma. Harkaway develops Ann Smiley’s character more fully than le Carré did, and readers can better appreciate how the Smileys’ strained relationship occasionally worked. Her tender side emerges, as does her steely reserve; after Smiley acquiesces to return to what she ironically calls his “grey mistress,” the Circus, “She would not crack. If she could not induce Smiley to stay by her side with her laughter, she absolutely declined to keep him with her tears.” (32)

The novel’s setting shifts from London to Vienna, Berlin, Budapest, Lisbon, and back to London as Smiley tries to raise Bánáti. He turns out to be a former KGB asset named Ferencz Roka who has threatened the personal security of Smiley’s soon-to-be nemesis, Karla, while looking for his wayward son, Léo, who fell afoul of East German authorities and probably died in captivity. The story becomes more le Carré-esque as Harkaway leads us through some occasionally complicated scenarios interspersed with vignettes of spycraft and the silent ruminations of his characters as they grapple with their motivations and attitudes toward each other. The action accelerates toward the end as Smiley and Karla move closer to Roka in their respective campaigns—one to save him, one to dispose of him.

Besides changing genres, Harkaway faced three other challenges in taking on the formidable task of filling in his father’s *oeuvre*. First, he had to recreate geographic and institutional settings le Carré lived in and could recount from personal experience but which he, not born until 1972, could not have. He has compensated for that lack with thorough research and travel and extensive conversations with his father and, presumably, intelligence veterans. Second, he had to place the novel’s action, atmospherics, and character development in between what was in *Spy* and *Tinker Tailor* without showing awareness of what will come, notably by not giving away how the latter tale ends. We get no indications that Haydon is a Soviet mole even though he’d been recruited by the time covered in *Karla’s Choice*, or that Control suspects anything is amiss. Aside from a recent setback attributed to assets’ careless tradecraft rather than treachery within, the Circus was enjoying a bit of an operational hey-day and had its own high-level penetration of the Stasi. Of

course, in the real world in 1963, Kim Philby had been unmasked and fled to Moscow, but we're dealing with a fictional MI6 here.

Third, Harkaway had to replicate the literary style and explore the persistent themes of betrayal, deception, and moral compromise that made his father's books so fascinating to read and, at times, so controversial. He does those exceptionally well, as a few examples illustrate:

*For Smiley, the experience of returning to the Circus that evening was like a willed drowning.... Now, as he approached the familiar door, he found that he was once again engaging in the exercise of paranoia, which had governed his former life.*

*Susanna looked back at Smiley and wondered what he was thinking. His voice was still gentle and he was the same shy, kind and yet almost resentful tortoise of a man he had been when he brought her in, but now there was something else in his quiet: a watchfulness that touched everything as if a fog were paying attention to the house it surrounded.*

*[Connie Sachs speaking] Then, in forty-five, glory and medals. The Soviets liberated Hungary, which is the first time in recorded history anyone's ever shown up for them and it was a bloody mess... Not history, in Mitteleuropa. This is the English mistake, to separate then from now. In those places there is only now, and it goes back forever.*

As his practitioner father often did in his own works, throughout the book Harkaway also offers sometimes cynically cast insights into the intelligence business:

*Not everybody in an organization needs to be a bright star—someone has to plod along and fill in all the gaps. Most of spying is ordinary, and the extraordinary is rarely good news.*

*The notion of constant danger was a madness that men in his profession must both inhabit and put aside, and the truth was more complex: that the*

*world could change in an instant from clear and kind to desperate and cold, and the trick to survival lay in knowing that instant before it happened, and not when.*

*In [Smiley's] experience, the first twenty-four hours of any interrogation were definitive. Within that time any person under questioning was cut adrift from their understanding of the world, whether or not they had arrived at their present state by choice, and would reach as a frozen swimmer does for any friendly hand. Human beings are not naturally silent, and in the sudden reversal of total vulnerability even less so.... A defector by definition wants to spend his coin before his former masters can steal back its value, and is the more ready to open up. Sometime on the second or third day, that changed: there was guile again, and often resentment, and the job became not a confession but a negotiation, from which neither side would ever emerge entirely satisfied. You give me this, I give you that; but the very act of trade made the product suspect.*

*It was the Circus's established practice, in cases of agents recruited by compromise or extortion, to leverage betrayal into a kind of dependency, solving problems as they arose, making gifts and fostering additions, so that eventually the Circus was vastly more needed for what it provided than it was resented for what it sought in exchange."*

*Karla's Choice* misses the mark only a few times. No inkling has been given that Susanna, 23, is so sexually promiscuous and perspicacious that she immediately sees through Bill Haydon's unspoken interest in her on their first meeting, nor would she be able to enter and move around a Circus building to meet Control without obtaining visitor access and having an escort. Thirty-something Guillam seems too young and inexperienced to be so worldly wise and to be handling such a sensitive and valuable agent as Hans Deiter Mundt, the Circus's mole in the Stasi. The car chase and escape through an underground maze in Budapest that provide the most exciting part of the book seem

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incongruous for Smiley, described earlier as “a stout, hurried little man with pouchy cheeks and thick-framed spectacles” (38) (in *Tinker Tailor* he’s “small, podgy, and at best middle-aged...[h]is legs were short, his gait anything but agile”).

Harkaway uses the suspenseful sequence to offer up some dry humor, however; “Smiley’s hope now, as he racked his brains for every instruction he’d ever been given on evasive high-speed driving, and found it amounted to going fast and not hitting anything....” (274) More in keeping with Smiley’s character is how he cleverly bluffs his way through a Hungarian check-point by posing as a haughty East German commissar while knowing only one word of the local language.

*Karla’s Choice* is as much about Smiley’s choices as Karla’s. After Leamas’s death at the Berlin Wall at the end of *Spy*, Smiley resolves to fight only within boundaries and makes his moral declaration to Control’s emissary: “We chose to win a bloody battle with more blood. When I came to my senses, I realized I’d crossed a line. I tell myself the Circus must triumph because the other side is monstrous...But...we abandoned our obligations and chose to be every bit as monstrous ourselves in quest of victory, and I said nothing”—which Smiley refuses to do anymore. (29) In his own eloquent introduction, Harkaway contrasts Smiley’s and Karla’s ethical worlds that Karla will set the terms for in the end:

*Smiley’s Circus was the depiction of intelligence work, which for a lot of people—whether they know it or not—framed the Cold War. His was the grim, unrelenting and unacknowledged theatre of espionage, bounded by the threat of nuclear annihilation, fought through a mosaic of countries*

*shoehorned into a binary international conflict, and ultimately unwinnable because victory of any real meaning lay in another arena entirely....Success, tacitly, meant something else: finding humanity in the deadlocked shadows, making the world better rather than worse as you go along, looking for a way to be kind in a context which favoured the cruel.*

In essence, Smiley’s choice, as indirectly posed to him by a colleague, is this: “What is it you don’t want to do, George?” (146) But Karla chooses to follow a much different course at the novel’s end (no spoiler here). Consequently, Smiley’s psychological and ethical state is set for what transpires in the *Quest for Karla* trilogy (*Tinker Tailor*, *The Honourable Schoolboy*, and *Smiley’s People*) after he makes his second choice—to return to his “grey mistress” because, as Ann rightly observes, “You have one more thing you need to do.” (296)

*Karla’s Choice* has received many highly favorable reviews, so the question arises whether Harkaway plans to join the Ian Fleming, Robert Ludlum, and Tom Clancy literary estates and write more stories that posthumously extend the work of the deceased originator. “There were always supposed to be more Smiley books,” Harkaway notes, but none as expansive as the early ones appeared. He writes that Alec Guinness’s consummate portrayal of Smiley in the BBC series constrained le Carré’s imagination; “The external Smiley had supplanted the one in his head.” (xi–xii) Harkaway appears to have no such impediments and hints in the acknowledgements that *Karla’s Choice* might not be his only excursion into 20th-century spy fiction. For le Carré—and Smiley—devotees, he’s off to an auspicious start. ■