

Everything Old is New Again

Classic Spy novel is reissued

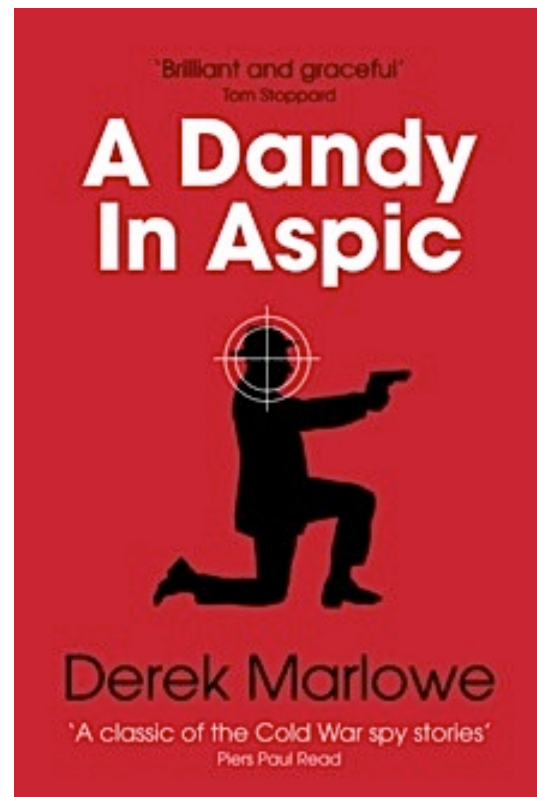
Suspended Sentences

by Jim Napier

An obscene number of today's crime readers will not be familiar with the works of Derek Marlowe. And that's a shame, for he was one of the brightest of lights in espionage fiction during the peak of the Cold War. He died in 1996, but between 1965 and 1982 Marlowe turned out a small number of impressive novels, beginning with *A Dandy in Aspic*, which he wrote in just four weeks. His roommate at the time, the playwright Tom Stoppard, was convinced that it would be a flop; after all, John Le Carré had himself debuted only a few years earlier with the first of what would become many definitive works on spycraft, *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold*. But when Stoppard heard the premise of Marlowe's book, he was forced to admit it was brilliant. American rights and film rights followed swiftly, and Marlowe was suddenly a global success. The novel is deservedly a classic, but, to quote Stoppard, "to be out of print is not a value judgment in itself, more like a hazard of the writing life." It has taken the reissue in 2015 by his son, Ben Marlowe, to bring it to the attention of the current generation of readers.

Alexander Eberlin is an unprepossessing, Oxford-educated man in his mid-thirties who spends much of

his leisure time in his rooms, reading or contemplating the view from his rear window, or taking uneventful walks through Hyde Park, then dining alone in his flat.



Eberlin's postgraduate education in Medieval Warfare has not proved especially useful in his career in British Intelligence, but leaving a cocktail party he meets two Russians who address him as Comrade Krasnevin, and direct him to a nearby car containing their superior, a man named Pavel. Having just finished an

assignment to kill a man, Eberlin indicates he is disenchanted with his work for the British. Trained at the Soviet Military College near Kiev, where he was given the identity of Alexander Eberlin, he asks to return to Russia. Pavel demurs, arguing that Eberlin is more useful in Britain, and his request is denied.

The following morning Eberlin is summoned to a meeting where an offensive mandarin named Brogue informs him that a most senior agent, Emmanuel Gatiss, is expected back from Istanbul. Eberlin fears that Gatiss will be able to unmask him. Despondent, he returns home and considers his prospects. It is not a pretty picture. He says "I added up my friends the other day. It was a difficult task but finally, after much drastic deliberation, I narrowed the number down to none."

And then the other shoe drops: Eberlin is ordered to attend a hi-level meeting in the English countryside, where he learns that his next assignment is to execute a Russian assassin that British Intelligence has had their eye on for some time. They don't know much about him – what he looks like, or where to find him; in fact, the only lead they have is the man's name: Krasnevin.

Eberlin, it seems, is being ordered to kill himself.

Among readers aware of the intrigues of Anthony Blunt and his jaded Cambridge conspirators in the fifties and sixties, Eberlin's *crise* will doubtless strike a familiar chord. But it's not

merely the ripped-from-the-headlines aspect that gives Marlowe's tale its appeal. The delicious irony of the plot is grounded in fine, dark writing that explores the tension between the inexorable machinations of British Intelligence and the all-too-human cog who has been ordered to carry out an assignment he cannot possibly accomplish. The outcome reveals a splendidly cunning resolution to Eberlin's dilemma.

But Marlowe does not rest his tale on plot alone, as fine as it is. One need only sample his incisive writing at random to appreciate its enduring appeal:

"The sexual undulations of Lady Hetherington were, in fact, well known in her section of London society, as well as on a small, but impishly pert Greek island in the Adriatic. She had, it seems, lost her virginity at an early age and had been offering herself as a reward for its recapture ever since."

Derek Marlowe died in California in 1996, of complications following a liver transplant. Although he left behind a limited number of works, they remain jewels in the British literary crown, his droll wit setting him apart from most of his peers. *A Dandy in Aspic* is a clever, literate, originally-told tale, that in fifty years has not lost its power to entertain.

Derek Marlowe, *A Dandy in Aspic* was reissued by Silvertail Books in 2015.

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Jim Napier is the creator of the award-winning website *Deadly Diversions*, which features over 500 reviews and interviews with leading crime fiction writers around the world. His own crime novel, *Legacy*, is scheduled to appear in the Spring. It will be the first in a series of contemporary British-based police procedurals.