

Everything Old is New Again

Not quite forgotten

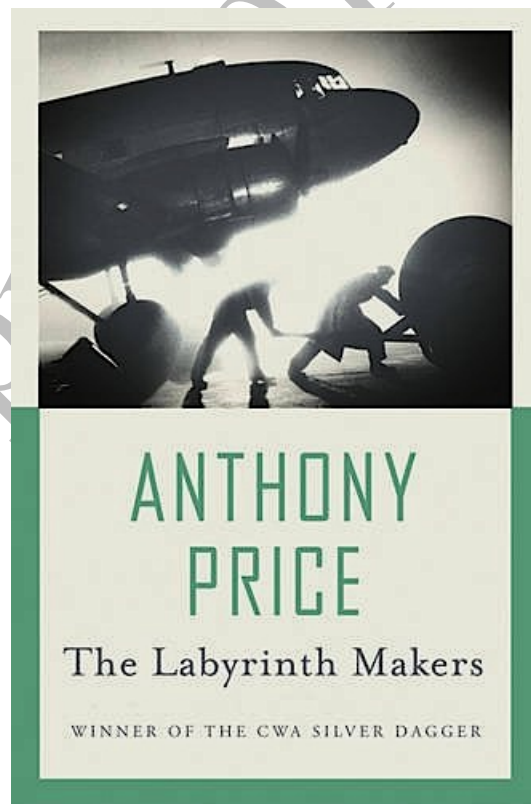
Suspended Sentences

by Jim Napier

There's an old curse that goes "May you live in interesting times," and it seems that for the better part of the past hundred years, we have. It wasn't long after the dust settled at the end of World War Two that the world faced a new conflict, tailor-made for the nuclear age: the face-off between the Western democracies (chiefly the U.S.) and Russia, in a long-running confrontation that came to be known as the Cold War. Fueled by anti-Communist hysteria largely created by the McCarthy Hearings, tensions between the two countries rose, culminating in the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962. Suddenly the whole world held its breath while we waited to learn whether the Cold War was suddenly going to turn very hot indeed.

Not coincidentally, it was at almost exactly that instant that novelists capitalizing on Russian-Western tensions began to really make their mark. The British author Ian Fleming, coming from a background in British Intelligence, had kicked off what was to become an iconic spy thriller series with *Casino Royale* in 1953; but it was not until the early 1960s, when JFK revealed that a Bond thriller was among his favourite

reads, that North American readers took serious notice. Before long the Bond novels, translated to the big screen, became huge box-office hits.



The tales owed much to their protagonist, larger-than-life James Bond. Bond was a superhero for the post-war era: impossibly handsome, suave, armed with lethal wrist-watches and exotic cars featuring armour-plating, machine guns and missiles, and complementing all that ordinance, a license to kill. But although Bond was utterly committed

to completing his assignment, he was also morally detached from it: he was simply doing his job, albeit very well. Bond's exploits over the decades would carry him from his home base in London all the way to outer space, and being on Our Side in a deeply polarized world, Western readers could be certain that he—and thus we—would prevail.

Bond's antithesis emerged a decade later in a more understated novel by an obscure author named David Cornwell, who would become known to the world as John Le Carré. No superheroes, his protagonists tended to be rather drab, often bespeckled desk-jockeys who inhabited the quiet corridors of Britain's MI5, enduring the drudgery of British intelligence work while doing their bit to save the world from the evils of communism. Drawing on his own experience working with both MI5 and MI6, Le Carré burst on the scene in 1963 with his epochal third novel, *The Spy Who Came in From the Cold*. The central figure of his narrative is Alec Leamas, the jaded, world-weary head of station in West Berlin. Leamas came to personify this new breed of protagonist: not Superhero but Everyman, quietly labouring to do his job while confronting the shifting moralities of a complex and duplicitous world. Le Carré's layered, nuanced take on the intelligence world features shifting forms, shadows and ambiguities, rather than the stark, black-and-white world of Bond, and readers cannot be certain of the

outcome of a Le Carré tale until the final page.

Anthony Price,
The Labyrinth Makers
(Phoenix/Orion Books, 1970)

Firmly in Le Carré's tradition of workaday spooks who labour quietly and out of the limelight, British author Anthony Price emerged on the scene in 1970 with his debut novel *The Labyrinth Makers*. The tale revolves around Dr. David Audley, a rather diffident Middle East historian and intelligence analyst who is tasked to look into the recovery of an RAF Dakota transport recently retrieved from a lake in Lincolnshire, where it had crashed during the waning days of WWII. Why are the Russians interested in it? Does their curiosity have anything to do with the mysterious cargo the plane was carrying? And not least, why was Audley tapped to look into the case? Was he given the job in the hope that he would fail, preserving secrets that his superiors would rather not have revealed? Audley must navigate the Byzantine rivalries that exist within the intelligence community as he tracks down the surviving members of the Dakota's flight crew, matches wits with a mysterious Russian, and tries to fathom the motives of Faith Steerforth, the daughter of the dead pilot and a beguiling young woman who has unaccountably taken a fancy to the rather bookish middle-aged analyst. Before it is over Audley and Faith will find themselves the target

of a team of assassins who isolate the pair at a remote farmhouse, and forced to confront one of the darkest secrets of the Russian government—which, if revealed, would threaten its very existence. Is the cerebral sleuth up to the challenge?

The Labyrinth Makers has been called an old-fashioned novel, and that's undoubtedly true. Like his creator, Audley is very much a gentleman of the Old School, and if the romance is muted, the sex can only be described as virtually non-existent. The violence is equally restrained as well, certainly by present standards. But shrouded characters and a devilish plot easily hold readers firmly in their grasp as they make their way among the various clues and red herrings toward an exciting climax with an unexpected twist.

Ironically, some have faulted Price for not producing more excitement in his novels. Their criticism seems to me to miss the mark: like Le Carré, the author's aim is to produce an exquisitely layered puzzle, in which the characterization is subtle and the reader is challenged to match wits with the author. *Smiley's People* can hardly be called exciting in terms of action; but it is nonetheless spell-binding on account of its layered and understated characters and subtle clues. The same may be said of *The Labyrinth Makers*: chock full of ambiguous characters and replete with tantalizing red herrings and plausible theories, it more than holds its own with the best of spy fiction

and deservedly earned for its author the 1971 CWA Silver Dagger, presaging the Gold Dagger he was to win 1974 for *Other Paths to Glory*. Indeed, *Other Paths to Glory* was subsequently shortlisted for the Dagger of Daggers Award for the *best crime novel of the last 50 years*. Price went on to pen a total of nineteen novels in the David Audley/Colonel Jack Butler series, some of the best spy fiction ever produced.

Not quite a forgotten book, *The Labyrinth Makers* has gone through several editions since its first appearance, most recently in 2010 under the Phoenix imprint by Orion. A superb work, it will appeal to a new generation of readers in search of a challenging, well-crafted, and utterly engrossing spy thriller set in an iconic era of international intrigue.

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