

Stranger Than Fiction

Consummate Spy-writer pulls back the curtain

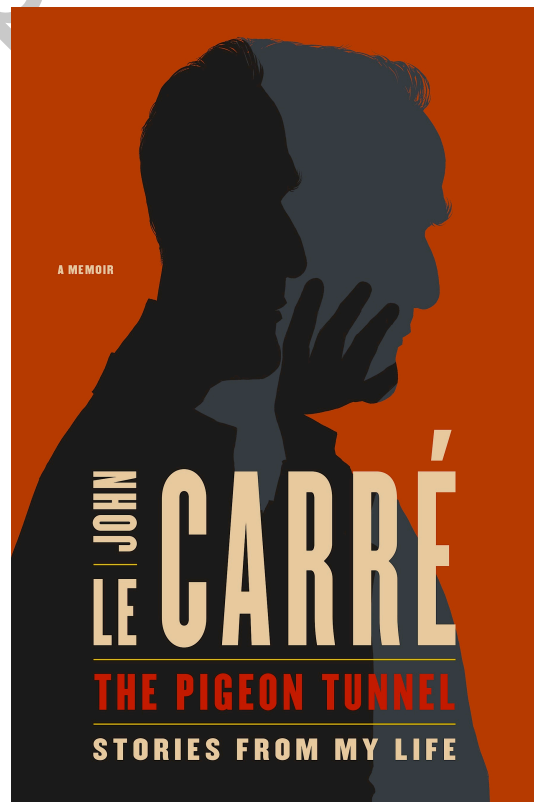
Suspended Sentences

by Jim Napier

Memories are a unique literary form; intensely personal, but not quite autobiography, they are usually a collection of isolated moments in the author's life that, for good or ill, stand out from the rest. The reader in search of a complete accounting of a person's life will necessarily come away disappointed. But a good writer, in command of his material, will tease the reader with highs and lows, and insights revealing not only the individual but also something of the human race. And David Cornwell, better known as the spy novelist John Le Carré, is a very good writer indeed.

Cornwell began writing his George Smiley spy novels in 1961, but it was his third novel, *The Spy Who Came in From the Cold*, that made his mark. It was very much an insider's tale, not, like Ian Fleming's Bond novels, rooted in faced-paced action, ingenious gadgets, or larger-than-life super-heroes, but in the much more nuanced world

of cynical ordinary human beings, but disillusioned by misdirection, suspicion, and betrayal. Both Fleming and Cornwell had worked in Britain's intelligence services, but it's Cornwell's tales that, half a century on, ring true and timeless with both readers and his colleagues in the trade. He skillfully



recounts his experiences with MI6 whilst serving in the British Embassy in Bonn during the Cold War, and later in Russia and in Southeast Asia, to paint a revealing account of a professional life lived in the shadows. And because Cornwell's cronies (and sometimes adversaries) in this odyssey includes opposite numbers in other nation's secret services, correspondents, arms dealers, remittance men, goons and buffoons, the tales he tells do not lack for drama – and, occasionally, comic relief.

There is, for example, his assignment to show a delegation of German officials around London, to persuade them of the attractions of British life. As they passed a building in Curzon Street, where young ladies advertised French lessons to visitors to the city, an enthusiastic guest from Frankfurt made sufficient noise that two passing policemen took notice. When Cornwell explained his sensitive diplomatic mission to the constables, one of them cautioned him to make "Less noise," and walked sedately on.

More ominously, in 1963 Cornwell found himself temporarily attached, as factotum and translator, to Fritz Erler, a luminary in the German Social Democratic Party (and during the war, an escapee from Dachau). Viewed as likely to become West Germany's future Chancellor, he became involved in

talks with Britain's Prime Minister, Harold Macmillan. The thorny issue underlying their talks was exactly how much say the Bonn government should have in any decision to launch US missiles from West German bases in the event of nuclear war. Macmillan, who experienced the First World War, traded reminiscences of their respective experiences, while coolly discussing the unthinkable scenarios explicitly detailed in the prevailing doctrine of the day, the theory of Mutually Assured Destruction. The meeting ended with Erler suddenly taking his hat, thanking Macmillan for his time, and leaving his office, confiding to Cornwell on their way out, "*Dieser Mann ist nicht mehr regierungsfähig*": This man is no longer capable of government. What is a junior official to make of such events?

And so Cornwell's account goes on, pulling back the curtain on the efforts of a Second Secretary of the Soviet Embassy, to defect to Britain, and to involve Cornwell in his intrigues (or perhaps to entrap Cornwell himself?); describing the efforts of a tiny French businesswoman to shepherd half a dozen Cambodian orphans into the relative safety of a French Consulate—and, when questioned, claimed they were all her children, even though they were manifestly the same age; and etching an

evocative portrait of what seems to be an English remittance man-cum-freelance-journalist languishing in an opium den in Laos, trying in vain to put more than one failed romance behind him.

These are the secondary players, but Cornwell chronicles his encounters with the shakers and movers as well. There is Yasser Arafat, whom Cornwell meets only after protracted and byzantine security arrangements have been settled, and who proposes a joint photo be taken to commemorate the event. Cornwell, looking to the possibility of a subsequent trip to Jerusalem, realises this might not improve his chances, and politely declines the honour.

Finally, I would be remiss in not mentioning one of the most intriguing revelations in the book: the author's account of his tortured relationship with his father Ronnie

—in Cornwell's own words a con-man, fantasist, and occasional jailbird. But that's for readers to explore on their own.

So what do you say of such a book? First, it is exquisitely written, an insightful and candid account of what goes on behind the scenes of international affairs, at once fascinating and chilling. It also humanizes the players in these events, for better or worse. And it is undeniably entertaining, a candid portrayal of a thoughtful man's wildly improbable life. It will resonate most strongly with people of his generation, or thereabouts, who have lived through these events, and with serious students of international history over the past sixty years; but others will find much to enjoy, or learn from, in these pages. A man of many coats, is Bernard Cornwell. Highly recommended.

Reviewed by Jim Napier, March 2017.

§Since 2005 Jim Napier's reviews and interviews have appeared in several Canadian newspapers and on various crime fiction and literary websites, including his own award-winning site, *Deadly Diversions*. His own crime novel, *Legacy*, is scheduled to appear in the Spring of 2017. He can be reached at jnapier@deadlydiversions.com