

Jost H i n d e r s m a n n. *Der britische Spionageroman: Vom Imperialismus bis zum Ende des Kalten Krieges*. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1995, ix + 250 S., DM 45.00.

Hindersmann's declared aim is to analyze the development of the British spy novel in the context of political history. He acknowledges the vexed problem of defining the genre and is not alone amongst critics in settling for a vague working definition based on thematic rather than formal criteria. For him, a spy novel is a novel about espionage. In practice, however, and except for his chapter on retrospective World War II novels, he mostly adheres to consensus, spy novels being those works which most people agree to call spy novels.

Ignoring other antecedents of the genre, Hindersmann describes how the spy novel grew out of the so-called invasion novels that flourished in the wake of Chesney's *The Battle of Dorking* (1871). He points out how these and the earliest spy novels both reflected and fostered a sense of Britain's strategic vulnerability in view of the shifting balance of power in Europe. Some of the novels directly influenced history. Most notably, le Queux's *The Invasion of 1910* (1906), serialized in the *Daily Mail* and accompanied by publicity stunts, was instrumental in fermenting the hysterical Germanophobia that ensued. Concerning the recurrent figure of the gentleman spy, virtually a generic feature until the 1930s, Hindersmann follows David Stafford in suggesting that this was a device to allay fears of *internal* social disorder by reinforcing readers' faith in the traditional class hierarchy.¹

The second chapter, covering the period 1914-1918, is devoted to John Buchan's Richard Hannay novels. Like their precursors, these works endorse patriotism and conservative class values, though Buchan is shown to differentiate between German people, unlike le Queux, who continued hysterically to tar them all with the same brush. The period 1918-1933 is only briefly discussed. The main contention is that the end of the World War entailed a virtual end to the casting of the Germans as the enemy, whilst the success of the Russian revolution and the recent rise of working-class unrest in Britain had the effect that bolshevism became spy fiction's new *bête noire*. Buchan's *The Three Hostages* and first two Bulldog Drummond novels by the more rabidly right-wing 'Sapper' (H. C. McNeile) serve as examples.

We come next to the allegedly "pink" decade of the 1930s and the appearance of several spy novels reacting against the conservative and patriotic heroism typical of the genre till then. Geoffrey Household's *Rogue Male* (1939) is likened to Buchan's novels in many structural respects but it is also contrasted for its protagonist's explicit denial that he was motivated by patriotism. The main exemplar of the new tendency, however, is Eric Ambler, who deliberately set out to replace the values of Buchan and 'Sapper' with popular-front politics and whose novels of the period eschew heroism and patriotism and attack capitalism. A short analysis of five of Ambler's novels illustrates these aspects. Neither Ambler nor Household addressed the matter of the rise of fascism in Germany, a fact which Hindersmann tries to explain generally, by referring to a prevalent desire in Britain to avoid further war, and specifically, by

¹ David Stafford, "Spies and Gentlemen": The Birth of the British Spy Novel, 1893-1914", *Victorian Studies* 24 (1981): 489-509

noting the historical abstraction of the authors' chief concerns. Ambler is preoccupied with the power of capitalism in general, whilst Household upholds the value of the individual against any system that tends towards totalitarianism.

Books on spy fiction invariably suggest by their silence on the matter that virtually no spy novels about World War II appeared during the war years.² Julian Symons says that the mystery writers of the day had their detective heroes resisting fascist espionage, but he observes (showing that he distinguishes popular genres by structural as well as thematic criteria) that these writers "simply grafted the theme [espionage] onto their usual detective story pattern".³ Hindersmann offers no discussion at all on the spy novel during World War II. Instead, he interposes a chapter on retrospective novels about Nazism and the war. This survey, covering the entire post-war period, distinguishes three categories: novels which, blending fact, pseudo-fact and fiction, locate themselves in the gaps between the acknowledged historical events of the war; novels which harp on the theme of surviving Nazis in post-war Germany; and novels which capitalize on the theme of former Nazis hiding abroad. This is a fascinating chapter in its own right, especially in the implications (which are only partly explored) about British perceptions of German culture. On the other hand, it is very doubtful that this noteworthy field of popular literature belongs in a survey of spy fiction, for many of the novels do not belong to the genre by any criteria.

The next chapter tackles the Cold War novels of Ian Fleming, John le Carré and Len Deighton by considering how each author perceives British post-war society, Britain's position in the world after 1945, and the ideological conflict itself. The popularity of Fleming's novels is ascribed to James Bond's flamboyant lifestyle and heroic escapades, which awoke an eager response in a society emerging from austerity towards affluence. The apparent modernity of the Bond novels, however, masks a lament for pre-war conditions of social hierarchy and national importance, James Bond being presented as a modish paragon of traditional qualities. Fleming's yearning for a selectively perceived pre-war order of existence represents precisely that element in British society which le Carré regards as the cause of the post-war crisis of orientation. Hindersmann presents the more or less standard view that le Carré uses the secret service as a microcosm of British society in which degenerate institutions and anachronistic power structures are still in position but unable to adapt to or accept the new post-war conditions. Hindersmann aptly draws attention to le Carré's critical representations of the Establishment in various British institutions, not least in connection with the public schools. Inexplicably, though, the latter case is illustrated by reference to *A Murder of Quality*, which is not a spy novel by any stretch of the imagination. Concerning the novelists' relations to the ideological conflict of the Cold War, Hindersmann maintains that Fleming capitalizes on the polarities of the Cold War climate but does not confront the ideological aspects of the conflict, whilst Deighton, who uses the background of the Cold War much more obviously than Fleming, is more concerned with the conflict between working and governing classes than that between Soviet communism and Western liberalism. Le Carré is the only writer of the three to address the ideological problems inherent in the Cold War struggle itself. Hindersmann demonstrates how *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold* and the main Smiley novels play out the conundrum that le Carré himself has more

² Two exceptions are Graham Greene, *The Ministry of Fear* (1943) and Michael Innes, *The Secret Vanguard* (1940).

³ Julian Symons, *Bloody Murder* (London: Macmillan, 1992), 222-23.

than once expressed in interviews: that in defending its humanistic values against the threat of Soviet communism, the West (or, at least, its secret services) is sometimes obliged to sacrifice the individual to the collective. In so contravening its own principles, the West leaves itself open to the question of whether it is worth defending. The final two chapters review the immediate effects of *glasnost* on the spy novel and consider the latest examples and future prospects of the spy novel in a world without the Cold War.

Hindersmann's study achieves three useful purposes. Drawing mainly on the existing body of secondary literature in English and German, it assembles an empirical summary of British spy fiction for the reader who wants a single volume in German. In an equally empirical manner it shows how political and historical developments, seen from British perspectives, have influenced the genre and sometimes have been influenced by it. Thirdly, it provides a compendious bibliography of primary and secondary sources. On the other hand, the study makes no use of literary, historical or cultural theory either as a guiding framework or as an occasional analytical aid. Two incisive applications of critical theory are in fact included in the bibliography but regrettably not mentioned in the text.⁴ To take the book on its own empirical terms, I must say that my students have found it to be a helpful and labour-saving source precisely because it offers a digestible and unproblematic history. Even then I would dispute the omission, for example, of Somerset Maugham's influential *Ashenden* stories (1928) and Graham Greene's several sorties into the genre. More importantly, however, and with the notable exceptions of the intriguing but digressive chapter on retrospective Nazi and World War II novels, and the necessarily inconclusive final chapter on the newest literature, Hindersmann breaks no new ground and challenges no old positions. There are tantalizing gaps and silences in this and all other surveys of the genre. One has the impression, for instance, that Buchan and le Queux were the only spy fiction writers during World War I, or that the genre was dormant in the 1920s apart from Sapper's four novels and Buchan's one. Do those books provide sufficient basis to claim that bolshevism was the new *bête noire* of the time? Who, apart from the jaded Oppenheim, was sustaining the right-wing tradition during the so-called pink 1930s? Was the pinkness only represented by one Household and five Ambler novels? Behind these trivial-seeming quibbles lies a misgiving that selective surveys like this one, which skate over the gaps left by their forerunners (gaps which, it must be admitted, can be hard to research) and stick to the milestones of the trodden path, help to establish a deceptively authoritative canon. This is especially misleading when the field of enquiry is a popular genre in its cultural and historical contexts.

HANNOVER

PETER BENNETT

Veröffentlichung mit freundlicher Genehmigung des Niemeyer Verlages, Tübingen

⁴ Michael Denning, *Cover Stories: Narrative and Ideology in the British Spy Thriller* (London: Routledge, 1987), which deals with the genre from its precursors up to the mid-1980s and, as its title suggests, analyzes the ideological significance of the changing narrative forms; and Tony Bennett and Janet Woollacott, *Bond and Beyond: The Political Career of a Popular Hero* (New York: Methuen, 1987), which critically examines a range of cultural aspects of the Bond phenomenon.