

The Ipress File Short Guide

The Ipress File by Len Deighton

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Characters

There are four principal characters who participate in the action: an anonymous protagonist-narrator, a British intelligence agent; Colonel Ross, a British officer, director of a department of Military Intelligence; Brigadier Dalby, director of a civilian provisional intelligence unit on special assignment; and "Jay" (a code name), an independent "business man" presently working in the interests of the Soviet Union.

The anonymous agent is single, of working-class origin, tall, stout, strongminded, fast-talking, wise-cracking, patriotic and incorruptible. He has black hair, blue eyes, and is dark complected. He wears glasses. In the pockets of his trench coat he carries several packs of French Gauloises, a garlic sausage, some Normandy butter, and a hammerless Smith & Wesson revolver.

Deighton's characterization here owes something to Homer's Odysseus, who tells the Cyclops: "My name is NoMan"; to John Osborn's Jimmy Porter in *Look Back in Anger* (1952); and to Raymond Chandler's Philip Marlowe in, for instance, *Farewell, My Lovely* (1940).

Colonel Ross, a public school-Sandhurst type, who had seen service in India, is the director of a department of Military Intelligence from which the nameless narrator has just resigned in order to join the provisional civilian intelligence unit W.O.O.C. (P.). He and Ross had long agreed to hate each other, but because they are English this relationship manifests itself in "oriental politeness." Ross is thin-nosed, sports a sparse mustache, carefully combs his hair, and has a yellowish complexion. A "regular" officer, he is restrained in his actions.

Brigadier Dalby, the new director of W.O.O.C. (P.), is another public-school Englishman, of the elegant, languid type, who, on occasion, likes to pretend he is "one of the boys." He is tall, has long fair hair, a light complexion, and a small puncture-type scar on his left cheek to testify that he was in attendance at a German university in the late 1930s. He favors suede shoes.

Jay is an "independent business man," i.e., a mercenary agent without scruples. He wheels and deals for the best price whether his client is the KGB or the CIA. A man without political loyalty and nationality, he possesses refined culture, is a connoisseur of modern painting and a gourmet cook.

The W.O.O.C. (P.) is investigating his activities.

The nameless narrator represents the kind of solid, dependable, and loyal English citizen Great Britain must depend on if the country is to survive.

Colonel Ross represents the typical ambitious career soldier always looking for opportunities to advance, but who does his job by meeting his responsibilities. Brigadier



Dalby represents the typical upper-crust publicschool product, one who had become associated with espionage but is lacking in traditional loyalty and integrity.

Ambitious and amoral, he is able to further the interests of the Communist Church he had joined in the secret society of his college. Jay, on the other hand, represents no church but his own, in which he is a self-admiring worshiper of himself.

Social Concerns

Deighton attempts to show two things: First, that the "Great Game" of British intelligence (SIS) is characterized by deceit and betrayal (double and triple agents), and it presents situations which are never fully understood.

If to survive in the field, agents must be tough, cunning, adaptable, and professional; they are not glamorous and semi-divine. They can be sure only of knowing which side they are on.

They must obey their superiors, but they dare not fully trust them. Second, if the intelligence agent is of workingclass or lower-middle-class origin, he is regarded as an outsider by his upperclass superiors. They regularly come from the upper classes and have public school (i.e., private school) and elite university educations (Eton to Oxford; St. Paul's to Cambridge; Harrow to Sandhurst). If not in military uniform, they wear business suits, striped shirts, and establishment or regimental ties, light cashmere overcoats or trench coats, and fedora hats. Deighton's agent is working-class and nameless, more an antihero rather than a hero of romance.

The nameless protagonist and narrator is a man in his early thirties, six feet in height, and slightly overweight.

He talks rapidly, has a cockney-bred wit, and tends to be sarcastic. Just out of military intelligence (MI-6), he has joined a special civilian intelligence group designated W.O.O.C. (P.), or War Office Operations Committee (Provisional), whose H.Q. is in Charlotte Street, London, which almost extends into Soho. This unit is investigating the disappearance of British scientists who are believed to be used by the Russian KGB in thought-control experiments. Hence the acronym "Ipcress," which stands for "Induction of Psycho-neuroses by Conditioned Reflex with Stress." The nameless agent's adventures takes him to the Near East, to an atoll in the Marshall Islands, and possibly behind the Iron Curtain. He concludes that in its decline Great Britain has become confused and corrupt; that the British upper-class civil servants have become incompetent, petty, and treasonous, and they have thrown away their birthright. His simple honesty, patriotism, toughness, persistence, and cockney sense of humor have allowed him to prevail. The grammar school pupil has triumphed over the public school Oxbridgians.

Techniques

The arrangement of *The Ipcress File* begins with a Prologue, which provides the motive for the telling of the story by the nameless narrator-protagonist, a member of the British secret intelligence service. He was instrumental in solving a security case of major importance, and therefore the Minister of Defense wishes to hear the story directly from him. The telling of the story then occupies thirty-two chapters. Each chapter is headed by an astrological forecast of coming events based on the future of a person born under the sign of Aquarius, the Water Bearer, during the zodiacal period of January 20-February 18 (Deighton was born on February 18), and the prediction often turns out to be ironical. In respect to the narrative, it is important to draw a distinction between the events themselves, the history or legend, and the way this history is told, the mythos or discourse, because the latter includes the voice of the narrator, which is supported or opposed by the various ventriloquistic voices of the other characters, in the rearrangement of the plot, the pattern of the events.

The novel is concluded by an Epilogue, an ironical event in which the British agent, after having left the War Office in London where he had told his story, journeys to a house near Staines where he rewards an elderly Russian KGB agent as an insurance policy if he has to go behind the Iron Curtain. An Appendix completes the work and contains notations and explanations on the text to lend authenticity to the story.

Authenticity has been a watchword in the best spy fiction, and Deighton's writing upholds this tradition. Such a trait may be due in part to the fact that the most successful spy novelists have themselves been experienced members of the intelligence community before they began to write fiction. Although Deighton himself was never a professional intelligence agent like Buchan/ Maugham, Fleming, Hunt, or Buckley, Jr., he did grow up in a household in which as a boy he may have heard tales of espionage that stimulated his interest in this endeavor. He once said that he grew up in an "Upstairs, Downstairs" world, since his father and mother were respectively chauffeur and cook in the household of the distinguished art critic and historian Campbell Dodgson, Keeper of Prints and Drawings at the British Museum.

During World War I, Dodgson, an expert in the German language, served in the intelligence branch of the War Office. Apart from such possible stimulation that may have resulted in Deighton's expertise in the workings of espionage in his novel writing, he has adopted a narrative point of view similar to that of the French *nouveau roman* school, which advocates that because life does not consist of plots the novelist's eye must be like a camera. In his descriptions Deighton does possess a "camera eye," and his plots sometimes lose their coherence in their labyrinthine concealment, as is the case with the South Pacific episode of *The Ipcress File*.



Themes

One prominent theme in *The Ipcress File* is class consciousness and class resentment. The protagonist, of working-class origin, resents being regarded as a "outsider" by his colleagues and superiors who are public school-Oxford educated. He believes firmly in meritocracy and resents the privileges granted the aristocracy of birth. However, by virtue of its heterogeneity, any civilized society is divisible into classes according to gender, age, health, education, occupation, ability, criminality, income, wealth, and power. Even when mobility is possible from one class to another, classes are irreconcilably divided whether or not resentment and conflict occur. A member of one class may or may not feel resentment and antagonism toward members of other classes depending on his or her temperament and outlook. Although the protagonist resents his class position relative to the upper crust, he is sufficiently honest, self-critical, and humorous in spirit not to allow his resentment to get out of hand and thus to hurt himself.

A second theme is the economic and moral decline of Great Britain. By the end of World War II, Britain had begun to lose its central place in the industrialized world. With the Conservative Churchill turned out and the Labour and socialist Attlee brought in, a vast program of the nationalization of key industries and a wide socialized health plan were put into effect, bringing into being the welfare state. With the granting of independence to India and the loss of other colonies, the hand writing on the wall signifying decline appeared plainly in view. When the protagonist is sent to the Western Pacific to observe the exploding of a neutron bomb by the United States, he sees which nation has replaced Great Britain in world leadership. Finally, the moral decline of the British upper class is shown by the treasonable action of certain characters — the effeminate upper class Brigadier Dalby, for instance. This instance in the novel reflects the numerous real-life treasonable actions on the part of the Cambridge Apostles. In 1951 the British foreign service officers Burgess and Maclean were exposed as spies, although both were able to escape to the Soviet Union. In 1952 Philby was exposed as a KGB "mole," and he was able to escape also. Later, Anthony Blunt, the notorious fourth member of the Cambridge spy ring and the art adviser to Queen Elizabeth, confessed to his spying for Russia, but he was granted immunity and his guilt covered up for many years.

The third theme is the intense competition between the British and American intelligence services versus the KGB during the period of the Cold War. The new provisional W.O.O.C. is drawn into the investigation of the kidnapping of British biochemists, a dastardly scheme being masterminded by one "jay" (a code name), who brainwashes the scientists and makes them adopt the Communist faith. Will they become moles? Will they help the Soviets make chemical or biological weapons? Brainwashing has included psychological pressure such as isolation, humiliation, or dependency; hypnosis and posthypnotic suggestion; electric or insulin shock; drugs (LSD, TAP, Scopolamine, Pentothal, and Amobarbital) together with narco-analysis; or the projection of subliminal images or sounds at sonic levels.

Adaptations

Five of Deighton's novels have been adapted to film: *The Ipcress File* (1965), *Funeral in Berlin* (1966), *The Billion Dollar Brain* (1967), *Only When I Larf* (1969), and *Spy Story* (1976). In addition, the film rights to *An Expensive Place to Die* have been sold. The anonymous hero of Deighton's novels is given the name Harry Palmer. In the film version of *The Ipcress File*, Michael Caine plays the protagonist as a slightly seedy Cockney, a not entirely authentic but satisfactory interpretation of the character.

Key Questions

Sovereign nations of importance have found it necessary to maintain army, naval, and air forces to provide for their own defense against possible enemies. The governments in charge of these forces need to keep abreast of the latest intentions, actions, and equipment of their enemies in order to make diplomatic decisions and also to plan military strategy and tactics in case of attack; consequently, they also maintain various intelligence agencies not only to obtain secret information but also to protect themselves from counterintelligence. In Deighton's novels we become acquainted to some degree with the British intelligence system. Of the various agencies, the most prominent ones are Security Service (SS), more commonly known as MI-5, and Secret Intelligence Service (SIS), more commonly known as MI-6. The former protects British secrets from foreign spies and prevents subversive action.

However, it has no powers of arrest and must depend on Scotland Yard's Special Branch of the London Metropolitan Police for taking people into custody. The latter, MI-6, carries out espionage all over the world. In *The Ipcress File*, the no-name protagonist apparently works for a special, provisional unit of MI-6 called W.O.O.C.

(P.), or War Office Operations Committee (Provisional). MI-6 is roughly the functional equivalent of the American Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). In carrying out intelligence missions, it is common practice for agents to justify even the most extreme action or the bloodiest deed on the ground of a "higher morality;" therefore ethics or morality is a matter for serious discussion both ideally and pragmatically.

1. What do you think of the ethics or morality of the killings the anonymous agent and Dalby must perpetrate in order to retrieve the kidnapped scientist code-named "Raven," especially after the narrator discovers that the men he killed were Americans connected with ONI (Office of Naval Intelligence) who were apparently on the same sort of mission as he?

2. Since the no-name narrator says that to make him confess, the U.S.

Army used similar brainwashing techniques to those used by the nondemocratic forces in their scheme to brainwash the British scientists they had kidnapped, are we justified in presuming that what one side finds pragmatic will soon be adopted by the opposing side?

3. Were you surprised that following the capture of Jay, who although working for himself was at the same time benefitting the Soviet Union, he was hired by British intelligence to work for them? Can you accept the narrator's apologia for Jay's amorality?

4. The spy-thriller, whether realistic novel (Le Carre's *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold*, 1963) or neomythical romance (Fleming's *Casino Royale*, 1953), is inherently a



popular literary form that appeals to the masses and is serial in its commercial production.

Therefore, it favors action over ideas and individualized characterization, as well as a colloquial style and references to current affairs, people, and things, often by specific name and model; and its essential theme is to protect the established order against those who would destroy it, from inside or out. How well does *The Ipress File* fit the foregoing thesis? Does it defy convention in some way?

5. Popular fiction is genre fiction that appeals to large sections of the general public. By genre fiction is meant "patterned fiction" whose subgenres consist of such types as the Gothic romance, the spy story, the detective story, the Western story, the fantasy story, the horror story, and the science fiction story. The best "genre fiction" has a kind of literary dynamism comparable to the best jazz music, musical comedy, popular singing, dance, or film. What characteristics does *The Ipress File* have that make it appealing to a popular audience? What does it share in common with other popular art forms?

Literary Precedents

Deighton's *The Ipcress File* follows the general tradition of the popular subgenre of the spy novel invented by the American James Fenimore Cooper with his *The Spy* (1821). In his novel, Cooper tries to compete with Sir Walter Scott's popular historical romances (for instance, *Ivanhoe*, 1820) by describing a romantic adventure that takes place in the midst of American society during a phase of the American Revolution, and it proved a great success.

As for Deighton, his work also follows the strong British tradition of the spy stories of Childers, Oppenheim, Buchan, Greene, Maugham, Ambler, and Fleming.

From *Casino Royale* (1952) to *Goldfinger* (1959) Ian Fleming's James Bond would become a commercial institution of considerable significance, hugely popular in the following decades, whether in the form of books, motion pictures, or television screenings. Despite Bond's reputation as a modern technocrat, inside he feels nostalgia for a past close to that of imperial Britain.

In his jousting with the Soviet assassination department called SMERSH, he believes it is carrying out a Russian imperial ambition. Unlike Fleming, Deighton was not a public-school Oxbridgian, but a grammar school dropout of working-class origin. When he wrote *The Ipcress File*, he replied to Fleming's upper-class attitude with a working-class stiff who dislikes and is distrustful of anybody outside his own class, a kind of "angry young man" perhaps inspired in part by Kingsley Amis's novel *Lucky Jim* (1954) and John Osborn's play *Look Back in Anger* (1956).

Deighton has acknowledged the influence on his spy stories of the founders of the hard-boiled school of detective fiction — Dashiell Hammett (*The Maltese Falcon*, 1930) and Raymond Chandler, especially (*The Long Goodbye*, 1953). Like Chandler's Philip Marlowe, Deighton's nameless spy can crack wise and take physical punishment.

Related Titles

Deighton's first five spy novels form a group featuring his no-name, tough, wise-cracking British intelligence agent introduced in *The Ipcress File*. He works for a special provisional and civilian branch of the British Secret Service, or MI-6. The other novels of this group are *Horse Under Water* (1963), in which he seeks to salvage Nazi-forged currency from a sunken German submarine; *Funeral in Berlin* (1965), in which he smuggles a Russian biochemist out of East Berlin; *The Billion Dollar Brain* (1966), in which he penetrates a computer-based, right-wing espionage unit headed by a Texas multimillionaire; and *An Expensive Place to Die* (1967), in which he attempts to prevent a catastrophe triggered by a U.S. lie that leads to the imminent explosion of a Chinese H-bomb. These fictional narratives have their real-life settings and approximate parallels during the conflict of the Western powers and the Soviet Union after World War II, starting with the dividing of Germany into East and West and the large-scale airlift to supply West Berlin during the Soviet blockade, ending with the explosion of China's first H-bomb in 1967. This period embraces much of what has been called the "Cold War."



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