

The Little Drummer Girl Short Guide

The Little Drummer Girl by John le Carré

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Contents

The Little Drummer Girl Short Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Characters.....	3
Social Concerns/Themes.....	4
Techniques.....	5
Adaptations.....	6
Copyright Information.....	7



Characters

For the first time in his novels, le Carre has chosen a woman as a central character. She is Charlie, a "half-gypsy, half-flower child" mediocre British actress, inspired by his own half-sister Charlotte. Charlie is chosen, kidnapped, and brainwashed by the Israeli Kurtz to avenge the terrorist attacks on Jews throughout Europe and the Middle East. Charlie must play a kind of double agent, a role considered implausible and unconvincing by Walter Laqueur and other critics.

In preparing his work, le Carre visited the Middle East, Beirut, a PLO prisoner of war camp, and talked with Yasir Arafat, whom he found very pleasing. Hence both the Israeli intelligence officer Kurtz and the Palestinian leader called Khalil emerge as positive characters in the novel. Kurtz, who has brainwashed Charlie, is a fierce urban guerrilla, a man of great energy and purpose. Khalil is intelligent and elusive. Joseph, the pawn used in the revenge, called by William Buckley "the most mysterious figure to appear in modern fiction" had, according to le Carre "a self-sufficiency that to weaker souls was a kind of courage in itself.

He was friendless but uncomplaining, the stranger who needed nobody."

Social Concerns/Themes

Having used the Far East as the theater of his operations in previous novels, le Carre now moves into the Middle East to develop a different picture of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as the terrorist escalation continues. *The Little Drummer Girl* narrates many bomb explosions: Bonn, Zurich, Leyden, Bad Godesberg among them, with all the immediacy of a newscast.

Le Carre has both an Israeli and a Palestinian hero, but his originality lies in showing the humanity of both sides.

In an interview with Melvin Bragg for the *New York Times* (1983), le Carre maintains that he "wanted to put a face on the Palestinians." His message is that "the intensity with which the Israelis defend what they have got can only be understood if one realizes the intensity with which the Palestinians resent what they have lost." Because of le Carre's sympathetic portrayal of his Palestinian hero, the book received mixed reviews, and le Carre defended the accusations of anti-Semitism that he received by offering his other books as evidence that he presented positive Jewish heroes, a point disputed by Walter Laqueur in *Commentary* (June 1983). The approach is different from earlier stories in that le Carre seems to have moved away from the tired, apathetic spy who wants to come in from the cold to a new look on life. Perhaps because of his own maturity, he now speaks out in favor of what may loosely be termed democracy in contrast to totalitarian regimes. He also allows his characters to become enmeshed in a number of other conflicts, not the least of which is love, which shows the emotional side of their existence. In his treatment of terrorism, he does not condemn this spreading mode of vengeance; he merely tries to make the reasons for it understandable.

Techniques

The Little Drummer Girl is a long book with a complex plot, many characters and subplots. It seems that Le Carre has moved progressively from the stark simplicity of *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold* (1963) to increasingly complicated stories. To some critics, this is an evolution; to others, an unnecessary complexity. The ambiguous question of Israeli responsibility in provoking terrorist attacks has brought Walter Laqueur to the conclusion that Le Carre is not a person who does not like Jews; he simply does not like people.

One of the great assets of the book, other than the timeliness of its subject, is the role of description. Le Carre had visited the Middle East with the intention of writing a new Smiley book, but somehow he could not put his sedate, bored British Intelligence officer into the inflammatory Palestinian-Israeli conflict. It was just not his milieu. The characters that he does use, by no means totally convincing, are, however, a part of their surroundings. Le Carre has the gift, as he himself says, of remembering places, as well as language and manner of speaking. The Middle East is thus dramatically presented, both the land and the life of the people.

Although there are fine scenes in the novel, especially the kidnapping of Charlie, there is much that is superfluous, slow-moving, and implausible.

Perhaps because of his earlier reputation — and more in the United States than in England — where *The Little Drummer Girl* was generally considered a failure, Le Carre continues to be an important figure. Walter Laqueur comments, "Considering that he can be read profitably neither for verisimilitude nor as great literature, nor for moral edification, this is no small achievement."

Adaptations

The Little Drummer Girl was released as a motion picture in 1984. It was produced by Robert L. Crawford and directed by George Roy Hill, with a screenplay by Loring Mandel. Diane Keaton played the main character. The motion picture is a valiant attempt to capture the complexities of le Carre's novel, but it fails to flesh out its characters.

Sister Irma M. Kashuba, S.S.J.



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