The Russia House Short Guide

The Russia House by John le Carré

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Characters

Le Carre's characterization is an outstanding feature of almost all of his fiction. His studies of the effect of a world predicated on mistrust, lying, and betrayal on individuals add depth to his fiction, making the stories meaningful in simple human terms. The impact of espionage on the world is almost always destructive. Lying becomes habitual, even preferable to straightforward truth. Betrayal turns into a complex game in which the loss of human lives is merely a way of keeping score. The reaction of many of le Carre's characters to deceit and death is to deny the reality of the darkness inherent in spying. British spy masters refuse to believe that there is a traitor in their midst, even when that traitor sells out the lives of countless agents. They delude themselves into thinking that their "friends" would never betray them. When George Smiley reveals that there is an enemy agent working in the highest offices of the British espionage establishment, they punish him for revealing how they had been deceived themselves, as if Smiley were guilty of betraying them. Other characters become hardened to their trade; they trust no one and ruthlessly use other people. Some, like Smiley, retain a beleaguered sense of humanity; they grow weary of the cruelty of their work, yet see it as a necessary defense of their nation.

Into this lopsided world in which evil often looks like good and good often looks like evil comes Scott Blair, known as "Barley." He is an unlikely secret agent — he drinks far too much, is filled with self-hate, and regards himself as a loser. His fragile personality is thrown into a world that would be confusing to even the most stable of people. Through him, readers can see how an ordinary man achieves extraordinary things and responds to the bizarre world of professional spying.

For a time Barley forgets himself, losing track of who he is. For instance, he is at one point surprised at his own physical strength; he had known that he was a strong man, but had forgotten it in the strain of trying to remember the multitude of deceptions required of him.

Barley's story is told in the first person by Horatio Benedict dePalfrey, also known as "Old Palfrey," "Palfrey," or most often "Harry." Harry is the resident lawyer for British intelligence.

Timid and officious, he seems unlikely to sympathize with the melancholy and undisciplined Barley. But like many others in The Russia House, Harry hides another personality beneath his stern veneer. Sympathetic toward those who are drawn into his world, he speaks with satisfaction about how Niki Landau turns out to be a straightforward patriot who keeps his word exactly as he has given it. He expresses discomfort over how Barley continually looks at him, as if asking for moral support or comfort. Barley recognizes in Harry what Harry himself does not see — a kindred spirit.

Harry's concern for people and their needs makes him a good narrator; he takes time to expose individual motivations and personalities. His reliance on law requires him to be very careful about presenting details. An honest man — even though he characterizes

himself as deceitful — Harry makes it clear whenever he is speculating and not speaking from fact. His world is ambiguous and he is not sure of what is going on. The events, although fictional, appear credible, as if le Carre is presenting a true story.

Yekaterina "Katya" Borisovna Orlova is in some ways a typical heroine of spy thrillers. Katya is beautiful, goodhearted, and warm — a seemingly unrealistic portrayal given the ruthless realism of everyone else in the novel.

One justification for her stereotypical portrayal is that the novel's narrator, Harry, is smitten by her and does not want to admit any frailties. She must also serve as a powerful motivation for Barley to risk everything to save her life. Barley loves her; he sees in her all the good that is missing in his life. It is little wonder that through the eyes of Barley and Harry, she seems the embodiment of great human virtues.

Ultimately, the success of The Russia House rests on the characterization of Barley. If the reader does not believe in Barley, it would be difficult to accept the premise of the novel. Big, strong, hard drinking, a lovable lost soul, he could easily become the stock character of a multitude of adventure novels. It is a sign of le Carre's mastery of characterization that Barley does not simply become a shallow gathering of eccentricities. Instead, he comes alive as a worldly man in search of an identity; he does not realize it, but his life has been a search for himself, for the man underneath the eccentricities that hide his unhappy personality. At first it seems that his British and American spy masters have given him his identity. His insecurities are replaced with crafts of the trade. He assumes the identity of the confident spy who can betray others easily because he has no firm notion of right and wrong. The man who routinely uses and betrays women in the early part of the novel seems to ideally fit the role of a secret agent — someone who must ruthlessly use people. Yet, Barley finds another answer, one only Ned recognizes at first, and Harry comes to understand only after the novel's main events are over. Barley discovers individual lives are not worth the secrets he is supposed to protect. Thus, when he betrays his country to the Soviets, he paradoxically remains true to his best self.

Social Concerns

One of the aspects of le Carre's fiction that critics most admire is its careful examination of the social implications of spying. In The Russia House, the Soviet Union is in the midst of glasnost, through which the government is trying to adopt a more reasonable attitude toward the Western world. The novel is full of examples of the changes, such as when KGB guards exchange a wink with a British book agent over their admiration of a beautiful Russian woman. The previously hostile attitude toward foreigners has seemingly relaxed.

On the other hand, The Russia House portrays a dark world in which superficial friendliness can disguise vicious rivalries. The Soviets still torture people into confessions; Western spies believe that no one, however well trained, can avoid betraying all they know to Soviet interrogators. Western spy agencies, too, have their dark sides, although they do not practice torture. Interrogations by British and American spy agencies are cruel and humiliating, treating even innocent civilians as if they were traitors.

As is usually the case in le Carre's fiction, right and wrong are ambiguous concepts. Neither East nor West can honestly claim the moral high ground in the world of espionage; indeed, there is neither a traditional heroic figure nor a traditional villainous figure in this novel.

Instead, The Russia House explores the grey areas that lie between good and evil, focusing on how realistic human beings cope with fear and a desire for better lives. This explains the novel's ambiguous ending: Is Barley a hero for saving the life of the woman he loves and her family, or is he a villain for selling out the CIA and British intelligence? In reality neither East nor West has a true claim to his allegiance. In a world of calculated cruelty and sometimes foolish spy games, Barley finds the one true claim on his fidelity: individual human beings whose private fears and joys are the only fully meaningful aspects of life.

In the end, Barley is true to his best nature; he saves innocent lives at a great risk to his own. Compared to the simple reality of individual human needs, the desperate secret espionage war seems insignificant.

Techniques

The Russia House is told in the first person by Harry. This colors the events of the novel, and Harry frequently reminds readers that they are seeing events through the eyes of a biased witness. Like George Smiley and other significant figures in le Carre's fiction, he yearns for a clean, honest, successful spying operation. The ambiguities of his life in the secret service gnaw at him, costing him sleep and troubling his conscience. He confesses that his image as an unemotional and fastidious lawyer is part of an act. He often mentions his love affair with a woman married to one of his colleagues. She wishes to marry him, and in his heart, he wishes to marry her. Even so, he is afraid of her and of the powerful emotions she represents. Thus he uses his secret work as an excuse not to commit himself to her; in essence his work becomes a way of escaping from himself. It is no wonder that he delights in the simple courage and faith of Niki Landau and that he finds the case of Barley intensely meaningful. Barley has the courage to act on his best principles once he finds them; Harry admits that he cannot do the same.

Le Carre makes Harry more of an observer than a full participant in the action. In addition, he takes advantage of the opportunities Harry's first-person narrative provides. Harry contrasts well with his subject, Barley. Superficially, they seem to be men who have no sympathy for one another. Harry is prim and punctilious; he behaves as if his job were all-important to him. On the other hand, Barley is a dissipated alcoholic whose self-pity seems always ready to burst to the surface of his personality. Yet, the men have kindred natures. Barley often turns to Harry for support. His pleading gaze causes Harry discomfort because Barley's fears and self-hatred reflect his own fears and disgust with himself. Harry's dry, matter-of-fact prose understates his agony over the conflict between individual decency and the indecencies life imposes on people.

Themes

Part of what makes le Carre's fiction appealing is its emphasis on human nature. Le Carre's novels are not about great armies of spies that clash in the night, deciding the fate of all humanity. Instead, they are stories of individual people, whose personalities shape what they do. Central in The Russia House is Barley's personality, not the characteristics of his government, or his spy agency, or the Western world.

Ned recognizes this, which is why he knows well ahead of time what Barley really intends to do. Ned's colleagues do not realize Barley's intentions; they naively think their training has somehow fashioned Barley into the faithful drudge that he could never truly be.

Thus, they are surprised by his betrayal.

Adaptations

The motion-picture version of The Russia House, starring Sean Connery as Barley Blair, and Michelle Pfeiffer as Katya, was released in December 1990.

Connery seems the embodiment of Barley, creating a character for the screen that shares all of the humanity of the character in the novel. In an interview, le Carre said that he was delighted with Connery's portrayal, although he himself had pictured Peter O'Toole in the role. The screenplay was written by playwright Tom Stoppard, and it emphasizes the interior lives of the characters and de-emphasizes action. Some parts of the movie are slow; the filmmakers dwell on sights and scenery, perhaps because of their eagerness to take advantage of being allowed to film freely on location in Moscow, a rare priviledge in the thenSoviet Union. The motion picture opened to positive reviews, with some reviewers noting that it is satisfying adult fare and it examines mature emotions intelligently.

Key Questions

The Russia House is a fine topic for discussion. It offers well-worked-out themes, first-rate characterizations, and taut suspense. A successful discussion could begin by focusing either on the novel's themes or its characters. The themes invite thoughtful discussion of the cold war, of the sacrifices people are expected to make in defense of their countries, of the rationalizations cruelty in defense of freedom, and of what is truly knowable about any nation's political secrets. On the other hand, the novel's characters invite discussion of their humanity and their distinctiveness. The characters, instead of the plot, seem to carry the action of the novel; they are the sources of suspense because events unfold from the mysteries hidden in their personalities.

They embody the conflicts inherent in the novel's themes.

1. What aspects of Barley's personality make him essential to the development of the themes of The Russia House?

How does he embody the ambiguities of the conflict between East and West?

2. Why do the British spies place their trust in Barley, an obviously dissolute alcoholic?

3. Why is Ned the only one to realize ahead of time what Barley will do?

What are Ned's functions in the development of the plot and themes?

4. Why is Harry unable to act upon his best nature while Barley is able to?

Is Harry's assessment of Barley accurate?

5. Why do the British spies not avenge themselves on Barley at the end of the novel?

6. What are Barley's motivations during the novel? How do they evolve?

7. What makes The Russia House appealing reading?

8. What statement does the novel make about the relationship between cynicism and altruism? Are both necessary parts of the human condition?

Does Barley act out of cynicism or altruism? Does he himself understand which motivates his act of betrayal?

9. Why are the supposedly experienced and hardened spies surprised by Barley's decision to betray them and save Katya? Are there any concepts missing in their lives whose absence makes them blind to Barley's behavior?

10. Why does le Carre make the point that Harry is a biased narrator?

Since the novel is mostly about Barley, why not use a third-person narrative voice? How does your knowing that Harry is biased shape your impression of events and characters?

11. How would the foreign policies of Western governments have changed had the Russian scientist's revelations about the Soviet nuclear weapons program been true in real life? Why does le Carre invite his readers to think about the possibilities?

12. At present, the Cold War seems over. Does this mean that The Russia House is no longer worth reading? Are there aspects to it that make its portrayal of the human condition universal enough to make it appealing reading after the Cold War is largely forgotten?

13. What does The Russia House imply about the value of individual human lives? What are the different characters' attitudes toward the value of human life? Where do individual lives fit in the ranking of their priorities?

Literary Precedents

In the early 1960s, le Carre and another important British novelist, Len Deighton, set new standards for the spy thriller. The early years of the Cold War had seen a multitude of fictional spies who, like James Bond, tended to be larger than life and have amazing adventures in a secret world of technological marvels. In The Spy Who Came in from the Cold (1963) and Deighton's The Ipcress File (1962), a more realistic kind of spy novel found a large and responsive audience. Le Carre was then still working in the British secret service; he used a pen name instead of his own because his government required him to do so. The unexpected success of his hard-nosed, no-nonsense account of intrigue, betrayal, and fear earned him enough money to quit his government job and devote himself to his writing.

Over the years, he has created a fictional world that seems starkly real.

However, he has deepened and enriched his stories by showing in them how the realistically portrayed world of spying displays in high relief the universal human needs for love, hope, and faith.

Related Titles

Most of le Carre's novels are tied together by common characters, such as Harry and Ned. The Russia House is not really a sequel to any of the earlier novels, although Harry mentions a few events from them. This particular novel exists on its own, depending not so much on continuing characters or past intrigues as on unique figures such as Barley and Katya and on the effort of a Soviet scientist to tell the world the truth about the Soviet Union's nuclear weapons. As with le Carre's other novels, The Russia House presents a realistic, dark world in which the human mind becomes confused, losing the distinction between right and wrong, and between "our side" and "their side."

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Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults

Editor - Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Library of Congress
Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults
Includes bibliographical references.
Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for fiction, nonfiction, and biographies written for young adults.
Includes a short biography for the author of each analyzed work.
1. Young adults□Books and reading. 2.Young adult literature□History and criticism. 3. Young adult literature□Bio-bibliography. 4. Biography□Bio-bibliography.
[1. Literature□History and criticism. 2. Literature□Bio-bibliography]
I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952
Z1037.A1G85 1994 028.1'62 94-18048ISBN 0-933833-32-6

Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1994