

The Secret Pilgrim Short Guide

The Secret Pilgrim by John le Carré

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Characters

Ned's memoirs provide the foundation of the novel. He reminisces about aspects of his career as he listens to Smiley give a talk to a class of future spies whom Ned teaches. Ned believes that the world is changing as nations form new relationships made possible by the Soviet Union's collapsing empire. It is his hope — and Smiley's belief — that old brutal practices of the Cold War have become obsolete, that future British secret agents will lead lives that will be less hypocritical and dehumanizing than were the lives of the agents of his own generation. From episode to episode, Ned traces his own growth into a top secret agent. He begins as an idealistic young man. In training he is paired off with Ben, one of British intelligence's leading lights.

He feels himself inferior to his partner, and his superiors also seem to think that Ben is much better. Once in the field, Ben transgresses and betrays his government; from this, Ned learns a hard lesson about what spying can do to people. He also learns not to trust people the way he had trusted Ben.

Ned decides that his life is "to be a search." He dedicates himself to ferreting out information and looking for truth. In one episode after another, he learns that absolute truth is hard to find. Almost nothing is ever what it seems to be in spying. Why does Jerzy, the Polish colonel, torture him? Obviously, it must be to force Ned to give him secret information; yet, in truth, the obvious is wrong. Jerzy tortures Ned not to receive information but rather so he can give it. Ned comes to suspect betrayal from any source. After all, Smiley had revealed that one of Britain's most trusted secret agents was actually working for the Soviet Union.

The response of Smiley's superiors was to punish him by relegating him to insignificant work. By the 1980s, Ned has become tired and unsure of what he has accomplished in life. He dislikes spying, being uncertain of its value. He hopes the kind of life he led will no longer be necessary in the future because of new arrangements with the Soviet Union. Even so, when he follows the news about how the Baltic republics are trying to break away from the Soviet Union, he wonders whether his government is now "diligently breaking" a Cold War promise to help the Baltic peoples.

Ned's memories and questions are triggered by George Smiley, a master spy of the generation before Ned's own. In some ways, Ned sees a parallel between their two careers, each having shared similar rewards and punishments. As Smiley chats with Ned's students, he seems to be a repository of wisdom. He scoffs "at the idea that spying was a dying profession now that the Cold War had ended." On the other hand, at the novel's end Smiley declares that his way of doing things is outdated and that therefore he will no longer come to the school for spies; the world will require new approaches to espionage. Still, when Ned studies his students, he sees in them what he and Smiley once were. Smiley represents what happens to a good man who must almost daily take charge of other people's lives and how having to lie to them, use them, and discard them — often without ever allowing them to know exactly what they are risking their lives for — can generate selfdoubt and self-reproach inside the best of men.



Among his students, Ned sees idealists like himself and the young Smiley; he sees the iconoclasts and the emotionally unstable who are nonetheless necessary to British intelligence because of their special talents; and he sees women, who now attend previously all-male classes, as a sign of changing times. The careers of Ned and Smiley represent a past that they hope the new secret agents will not have to follow. Ned's own weary, melancholy attitude suggests that this hope may be as elusive as finding truth or happiness in the necessarily deceitful world of spying.

Social Concerns

Although *The Secret Pilgrim* focuses on the conflict between the free and Communist worlds, it does not present many comparisons between Western and Eastern societies. The novel acknowledges Communist governments' torture and abuses of human rights, but it is more concerned with how deception affects individual people. The practice of spying is shown to be necessary for Western democracies; they need to know how to fend off threats to their sovereignty and liberties. On the other hand, characters such as Ned and Smiley note that some aspects of spying are antithetical to the ideals of freedom which form the moral foundation of their democratic government. They want to see themselves as secret protectors of the public good, but they wonder whether such aspects of domestic spying as wiretaps, investigations into people's private lives, and the Official Secrets Act actually help or harm the people they are supposed to serve. Overall, the novel suggests that even though spying can be destructive to the personality of individual spies, it is necessary in a world in which many powerful countries have no respect for the rights of others.



Techniques

The Secret Pilgrim is one of le Carre's most brilliantly written novels. It is a "framed" story, with an outer story that surrounds the main story; the frame is Smiley's talk with Ned's students. This frame allows for three different generations of spies to interact.

Smiley represents the World War II generation, which joined British intelligence when anything seemed possible, when the world seemed ready to be made good, peaceful, and safe, with the British Empire still intact. For Smiley's generation, the 1950s and 1960s were profoundly disillusioning.

Ned represents the generation that joined British intelligence during the height of the Cold War, when spying was a murderously desperate contest between nations. His students represent the future; they are the hope for better days, when it may be possible that spying will become less of a deadly war for national self-preservation.

The interactions among these characters provide perspective on the main narrative. Ned is able to refer to comments made by Smiley and his students in order to provide insights into the tales of human suffering that make up the bulk of the novel.

The novel is episodic, with the character of Ned providing most of the links from one event to another. Like Smiley, Ned has become sensitive to humanity. He feels the losses of those he has known deeply and remembers their hopes having been dashed just as his own were. He calls his life a search, but as he tells it, it is more of an education in human strengths and weaknesses. The episodic organization of the novel allows him to examine several different kinds of people, such as Jerzy, who believes that his own cruelty has cost him his emotional life.

Jerzy concludes that "by ceasing to feel he was ceasing to exist," so he spies for the British in part just to generate feelings and thus feel alive. Bella, the beautiful and sexually dynamic Soviet expatriate who is suspected of being a double-agent, turns out to be exactly what she seems, a strong, honest woman; Hansen, the brilliantly talented agent who survived the horrors of the genocidal war waged by Pol Pot in Cambodia, sees his daughter's personality destroyed by Marxist ideology, and now lives with her while she follows the only life that gives her a feeling of belonging, that of a brothel prostitute. These are colorful people whose portrayal makes them also realistic.

The episodic novel has at least three potentially significant weaknesses: the characters may not be well developed and may be merely one-dimensional stereotypes; the characters may become confused with one another and be easily forgotten; and the narrative may not flow, encouraging readers to close the novel after an episode and not reopen it. In *The Secret Pilgrim*, the characters are brilliantly realized.

Ned's narrative has a stark, documentary feel to it, making the novel's events seem as though they may have actually happened. This carefully controlled realistic tone,



enhanced by well-observed details of locale and local customs, provides a fine background for the characters who are made more real by the world they inhabit.

Ned's primary interest is in what happens to people who risk their lives to serve others and he studies them in depth. For instance, Hansen emerges as a compelling figure. His life is a great modern tragedy played out against the most horrifying events of his time. His treatment at the hands of the Communists points out that there are vital reasons why he and Ned must ply their trade. Hansen himself is a complex man, talented yet whimsical. Something of a lost soul, he finds an anchor for himself in a bizarre and out-of-control environment, and it is this humane anchor that the novel implies is essential for survival. He loves his daughter and gives himself to her.

Ultimately, the essential aspect of working for the public good demands that one focus on individuals and their welfare.



Themes

In a series of loosely connected episodes in the career of ace field spy Ned, *The Secret Pilgrim* examines how people behave under extreme stress.

The most dramatic of these episodes is the one in which Ned is tortured by Polish agents. With all his courage he resists giving them what they want. He is beaten and loses teeth; he is tied to a rack and worked over. Typical of the melancholy tone of the novel, Ned's determination and endurance turn out to have no real meaning. He thinks that the colonel in charge of torturing him is after important secrets that could cost the lives of agents working for the British; instead, the colonel is only testing him to see how tough he is. It turns out that the colonel wishes to betray the Communist government, and in a bizarre twisting of motivations, he has tortured Ned in order to work for him; the colonel wants a tough man to be in charge of his own spying for the British.

The colonel is in search of a kind of perverse truth: He wants to find an honest man who would be true to his commitment to him. Throughout the novel, people seek truth, knowledge, and reassurance. A curious contrast to Ned's episode with the Polish colonel occurs when an old British war hero visits Smiley, who works in an office where citizens can report what seem to be suspicious activities that may involve spying against their country. The old war hero has come to find out whether his son worked for British intelligence. When he visited his son in prison, his son had claimed that being in prison was only a cover for his being out of the country, spying on Russia. After his son is stabbed to death, he comes to Smiley in hopes of finding the truth. After investigating the case, Smiley learns that the son was a nasty, vicious criminal who had led a life of crime, and who had died as he lived, in a vicious stabbing. Yet, when the old war hero returns with his wife, Smiley lets him believe that his son was involved in ultra-secret work, and gives the couple cufflinks that are supposed to symbolize their son's rank in British intelligence; the cufflinks are actually a pair given to Smiley by his wife before she had an affair with a vile double-agent, precipitating the break up of their marriage. Ned speculates on why the hard-nosed Smiley would allow the old couple to believe a falsehood — that their degenerate son was actually a heroic secret agent. In the convoluted world of secret intelligence, the falsehood actually gave Smiley a kind of truth. In the world of espionage, agents seldom know how their work will turn out; the case of the bereaved parents of a criminal son gave Smiley a moment of certainty in an otherwise uncertain career.



Key Questions

The *Secret Pilgrim* is likely to generate rip-roaring discussions: some readers are likely to be outraged by the novel, others are likely to be dismayed, disappointed, encouraged, excited, or made meditative. The novel is a powerful study of the effects deception has on the human spirit, and it suggests that people need certainties in their lives — that they need truths. Exactly what these truths may be could be a good topic for discussion. The one-time spy whose daughter becomes a prostitute offers a challenging interpretation of what is good for individual people and a hard-edged look at what wounded spirits must do to find meaning in their lives. Throughout the novel, Le Carre invites close examination of what motivates people who lie for their living and of the implications for societies that encourage lying and subterfuge. In *The Secret Pilgrim*, individual lives matter, and the novel implies that individual lives matter more than social standards.

1. How does the classroom setting provide a frame for the narrative? How does it link episodes together? Does Le Carre take full advantage of the possibilities his classroom setting offers?
2. How does Ned grow during the narrative? Why does he recollect the particular episodes that he does? Does he like what he has become?
3. Why would Smiley believe that he has no more to offer modern students of espionage? How is this attitude a reflection of his personality? Is he right?
4. What important aspects of individual humanity seem to be universally lost by professional spies?
5. How do various characters find truth? Ned seems to be hunting for it everywhere. Does he find it? Is there more than one truth to be found?
6. Why does Ned dwell on ambiguities rather than his clear-cut successes and clear-cut failures?
7. What motivates Ned and Smiley?
Do they have ideals? Do they believe that they serve just causes?
8. Will there always be a need for spies? Who would they spy on? Who would be the Western world's enemies?
9. It is important to note that the spies in *The Secret Pilgrim* are often spiritually crippled by the immense evil they must combat, as well as by the deceptions they are expected to formulate. What is the nature of the evil they fight? Is there ever any doubt that communism in particular is ever anything but far worse than the Western alternative?



10. How resilient is the human spirit in *The Secret Pilgrim*? How do wounded spirits cope? Is le Carre's examination of the human spirit profound?

11. The novel is presented in episodes. Why would le Carre use this format to present his characters and themes?

12. What is the novel's most important theme? How closely linked is it to the novel's characterizations?

13. Who are the most memorable characters in the novel? What makes them come alive?

14. What are the dangers the novel suggests are inherent in a life of deception? Which of these dangers poses the greatest threat to the individual person? Which poses the greatest threat to Western societies?

Literary Precedents

The Secret Pilgrim is in the tradition of le Carre's *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold* (1963). It is a typically gritty account of the work of spies, with an emphasis on the human cost of the Cold War.

Related Titles

The Secret Pilgrim takes place in the British intelligence community that le Carre has included in most of his earlier work. It is more clearly linked to his earlier work than *The Russia House* (1989) because of the inclusion of George Smiley, who appears prominently in earlier novels, most notably the "Smiley trilogy" of *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy* (1974), in which Smiley unmasks a Soviet agent working in a high position for British intelligence, an event that is discussed in *The Secret Pilgrim*; *The Honourable Schoolboy* (1977), in which Smiley helps the British intelligence community recover from the chaos created by the enemy agent; and *Smiley's People* (1980), in which Smiley pursues his archenemy, the Soviet master spy Karla.



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