

Spy Line Short Guide

Spy Line by Len Deighton

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Characters

There are three main characters in *Spy Line*. Bernard Samson is a well-built, quiet man about forty years of age. He is of respectable middleclass origin — his father was a Secret Service agent as was his Uncle Silas Gaunt — who grew up in Berlin and speaks fluent German as well as English and Russian. An English citizen, he has a small home in a London suburb.

He was a field agent — one of the best — for a number of years before being made a senior staff member of the German Station; although he is a noncollege man, he has educated himself to a respectable degree.

He is married to Fiona, the daughter of an industrialist whose callous greed makes him a latter-day *Bounderby* of *Coketown*. She is Oxford-trained, a hardcore, independent woman who is also a Secret Service agent. They have two children. As the novel begins, however, he had previously, as related in *Spy Hook* (1988), been assigned the mission of discovering a mole in SIS and had more or less stumbled upon "Operation Hook." This discovery had resulted in the revelation that his own wife, Fiona, apparently is the KGB double agent, and she defects to East Berlin. Consequently, he himself is in disgrace because his superiors in the Department are suspicious of his loyalty as a possible collaborator with his treasonous wife. In fact, they have issued a warrant for his arrest. Therefore, he is on the run and hiding out in Berlin near the Wall in Kreuzberg.

Since Samson's wife had fled to East Berlin from London, where she worked at London Central (the H.Q. of SIS), the children abandoned at his home are left motherless. Samson therefore obtains the services of London Central employee Gloria Kent to care for the children. Gloria is a Hungarian refugee, the daughter of a dentist, also a Hungarian refugee. She is an attractive blonde and settles nicely into the Samson family. She falls in love with Samson despite the age difference, and he is likewise fond of her. Of course, one gathers that he does not expect to see Fiona again. However, because of the age difference between Gloria and Samson, some people question Samson's competence as a husband and father. But there are always people of this kind.

The story in *Spy Line* is essentially the story of these three people and how events affect their lives, and they do affect them with severity. Near the end of the novel Samson participates in a fire fight that allows Fiona to escape to the West through the Department's sacrifice of her sister's Tess's life. Her sister's corpse is fixed in such a way that the remains will be identified as Fiona's. Samson and Fiona are flown to the United States and domiciled in southern California for extensive debriefing. Samson learns that his wife's defection had been an elaborate cover story carefully orchestrated by the Department and that she had been in "deep cover" since her Oxford days.

He had been a mere pawn in the "Great Game" in which Fiona was the Queen. But if the Department had gained something worthwhile — a result which seems problematical — the result has been tragic for the three principals. He was denied the

promotion he deserved and his career is ruined, even though his reputation for loyalty and integrity may be restored.

He has not really regained his wife, for it is clear that her mental and emotional life has suffered a severe blow from which she seems unlikely to recover. Finally, his relationship with Gloria would seem to be broken and the future of his children seems decidedly vague.

In the last volume of the trilogy, *Spy Sinker* (1990), Deighton tells the story mostly from Fiona's point of view, a technique which does not work well at all. Although she is called a "surrogate male" she is shown having crying jags and fits of self-recrimination and remorse.

Social Concerns

Deighton has completed two trilogies and has begun a third in which he develops the character and social relations of his veteran field agent Bernard Samson, of Her Majesty's Secret Service, whose name suggests his double personality. St. Bernard of Clairvaux was a monk who, on the one hand, devoted himself to solitude and contemplation, and on the other hand, was a man of action, who organized, for instance, the Second Crusade. Also, the Biblical Samson was, on the one hand, a reflective judge, and on the other hand, a fierce warrior, who killed a thousand Philistines with the jawbone of an ass. The first and second volumes of Deighton's third trilogy, *Faith* (1994) and *Hope* (1995) have surprises that contradict previous assumptions. For instance, rumors are circulating that Tess is still alive in East Germany.

What is to be made of such factual contradictions?

Deighton's psychodynamic studies of Bernard Samson in the trilogies go beyond his realistic spy novels such as *Funeral in Berlin* (1965). These studies move in the realm of the serious novel of character, psychological analysis, and sociological exploration. Samson becomes a fully developed character.

His is a sharply delineated portrait of a self-educated, highly competent professional agent, who has married an Oxford-trained upper-class woman who is also an intelligence agent. They have two children. In *Berlin Game* (1983), Samson's task is to ferret out and unmask a Soviet mole. To his shock the traitor turns out to be his wife, who defects to East Berlin. Like the Biblical Samson, he has been betrayed by a woman. His wife's defection undermines his credibility with his superiors in the Department. Throughout the rest of the Tennis trilogy and into the second volume of the Fishing trilogy, Samson is desperately trying to regain his lost reputation.



Techniques

The first two novels of the trilogy are told in the first person by the protagonist, a quiet, unpoetic, stubborn man not given to wit, sarcasm, or colorful display. His narration is plain, staid, and straightforward. It is occasionally sprinkled with some English slang or some German words, phrases, and sometimes a sentence — usually a quotation. The third novel *Spy Sinker* is told mostly from the point of view of Fiona, but this technique is predominately a failure. Critic Franz G. Blaha tells us why: The previous two novels are narratives that set forth Samson's quest to find the truth and to recover his lost reputation for loyalty and integrity. However, because Fiona did not share in this quest "her perspective," asserts Blaha, "is alien to the reader" of the quest volumes. Therefore, in Blaha's eyes, her attempt to tell what she had not experienced "is not very successful."

Deighton is masterly in constructing and sustaining intricate and complicated plots while concealing their import and impact until nearly the end of a novel. Sometimes the development of the action and its motivation will disappear into discussions that appear mere trivia only to surface when the reader is about to give up. Then the reader is carried by suspense until the actual motivations of the characters are made clear by the revelation of a completely different story from the one that had been entertained. Sometimes the protagonist, as in *Spy Line*, learns that he has been manipulated during the development of the action in ways he never thought possible by his own intelligence organization, without any regard for his welfare. He finds that his superiors, supported by their class status and motivated by personal ambition rather than by patriotism, have done him harm through irresponsible jockeying for promotion or the award of a knighthood.

Although Deighton wisely restrains himself in representing scenes of violence, his descriptions of violent action amount to masterly paintings of sharp and detailed imagery. For instance, in *Funeral in Berlin* his description of the terrible contest between the anonymous agent and aka Jonnie Vulkan in the garage is astonishing in its details, with Johnnie's death taking place by accident rather than at the hands of his anonymous agent. Also, in the same novel there occurs the masterly account of the accidental conflagration death of the villainous Hallam during the fireworks display. And in *Spy Line* there is the masterly depiction of the night fire fight on the East German Autobahn between the members of the Ford Transit van: Teacher in a gorilla suit firing a 9mm. Browning semi-automatic; the frantic Tess; and Samson firing his Webley Mark VI 455" revolver; opposing the members of the East German Wartburg: two Germans armed with pistols; Stinnes, armed; and Fiona; plus the loner Thurkettle, the mercenary assassin hired by the Department, who had come on a motorcycle and was armed with a pistol with a long silencer. "Bang. Bang. Bang. Bang.

Bang." People dead. Blood. Samson wounded. Samson and Fiona reunited.

Themes

Although an English citizen, Samson grew up in Berlin. Since his wife's defection, he has been suspected of treason and a warrant has been issued for his arrest. Hence he is hiding in Berlin in a "pad" located against the Berlin Wall in the sleazy part of the Kreuzberg district, where the counterculture flourishes and young Turk immigrants may molest a loner. In fact, some such hoodlums do molest Samson and he pulls a gun on them.

Perhaps the most important theme in *Spy Line* is that a secret service agent can become involved in an operation that the agency may pragmatically decide depends on his death or imprisonment. In Samson's case the Department's open doubting of his integrity and loyalty is not merely a gross assumption based on the stupid notion of guilt by association, but the Department knows all the time that there is no reason at all to doubt Samson. The doubt is a mere ploy and nothing but misinformation to lull the Soviets into considering Fiona a legitimate defector.

Although Samson's life is preserved, Fiona's sister Tess is cold-bloodedly murdered and fixed to be taken as Fiona to preserve the secrecy of the operation.

Another theme is that secret intelligence is inevitably linked to politics. A nation's foreign policy decisions depend on adequate knowledge, some of which may have to be supplied by secret intelligence, because politicians have to decide courses of action in regard to the capabilities and intentions of foreign nations whether they are adversaries or allies. Without politics, intelligence collection by governments would not be necessary.

A third theme is that it is more or less natural that experienced field intelligence agents become somewhat paranoid, but they do not become paranoid to the extent that they feel that no one can be trusted. Samson explains: "I am not paranoid. That is to say, I am not paranoid to the extent of distrusting everyone around me. Only some of them."

Lastly, there is the theme that the privileged class, or those whose origins are aristocratic and who are mainly Oxbridgians, are no longer morally or intellectually capable of governing Great Britain. Moral responsibility, know-how, and talent must take precedence over inheritance. Samson's superiors tacitly acknowledge his meritocracy, despite knowing that his origins are middle-class and that he is a noncollege man, when they consistently rely on his services because they feel confident that he can get the job done.

Adaptations

Deighton's *Spy Hook* was issued as an audio cassette by Chivers Audio Book in 1993, and *Spy Sinker* was issued in 1995. Both of these cassettes were considered unsatisfactory in the quality of their voice presentation by critic John Hiatt.



Key Questions

In his Bernard Samson trilogies Deighton seeks to transcend the traditional spy novel by avoiding conventional stereotypes and moving toward the serious novel of character with its subtle analysis of motive and moral choice combined with dramatic action and a sense of style, as one sees in the novels of such artists as Stendhal, Proust, Conrad, and Henry James. This is not to say that Deighton's work is worthy to be compared with these authors; it is merely to indicate the direction in which Deighton has chosen to go in order to expand the narrow scope of the traditional popular spy novel.

Fruitful discussion therefore can be developed by attempting to judge Deighton's success in committing himself to the goal he evidently set for himself. But comparisons can be invidious, inappropriate, or illogical. One critic sees Deighton's presentation of seemingly unrelated events and characters which turn out later to be related as typical soap opera. But soap operas feature stock domestic situations, melodramatic love conflicts, and sentimental treatment, with the capital sin being adultery. Such is not the case with the "givens" of the spy story, which are national defense espionage and counter-espionage, intelligence agents and double agents employed by a national defense organization, and secret operations, with the capital sin being treason. At any rate, such legitimate questions as the following may fruitfully be discussed: How near or how far do Deighton's studies of Bernard Samson come to such realistic novels which combine action with the examination of character, motivation, and moral responsibility as Joseph Conrad's *Lord Jim* (1900), Henry James's *The Ambassadors* (1903), Stendhal's *The Red and the Black* (1831), or some other novel of like character and worth? Or, apart from characterization and plotting, how worthy of respect is Deighton's literary style? Or, do you think Bernard Samson an interesting enough person to attract new readers in the future? Or, do you think Deighton should give up his ambitious goal and do something else?

1. Might one say that although Deighton has succeeded in "deglamorizing" the spy story, he has not succeeded in wholly "demythologizing it"? Do you think it ought to be wholly demythologized, or might that be the secret of its power?

2. Halfway through Chapter 18 of *Spy Line* a masquerade party is held at the Lisli Henning-Werner Volkmann hotel to celebrate the new refurbishing.

The outdoor aspect of the party is rained on and indoors the large crowd becomes quite wild until the affair takes on the character of a Mardi Gras carnival. This fervor comes to a climax at the end when Teacher, Samson, and Tessa are taking off in their Ford van to meet Fiona's party on the East German Autobahn, where a fire fight ensues and several people are killed, including Teacher and Tess. Do you think that the Mardi Gras type of carnival scene is symbolically related in any way to the fire fight and death scene on the Autobahn? If so, in what specific way?

3. In her ambition to pursue a patriotic quest, do you think Fiona denies her wifehood and motherhood by abandoning, perhaps forever, her husband and children? Although



her quest was successful from an intelligence point of view, she herself paid a heavy price by suffering a mental and emotional breakdown from which she might never recover. Further, by her action, her sister Tessa met her death, and she caused her husband and children much harm and suffering. Do you think her successful patriotic quest was worth it?

4. While Fiona is on her patriotic quest, Bernard is on a quest to find out the truth behind her disappearance.

Was she kidnapped by foreign agents as a hostage to be exchanged for some KGB spy who has been arrested in the West? Or, was she actually a double agent for the KGB and a traitor to her country and family? Might one say that Bernard is on a quest for spiritual truth in a moral wasteland? How do you see this matter?

5. When Fiona and Bernard are returning in the Ford van after the fire fight in which Teacher and Tessa were killed, she, at the wheel, asks him, "Are you all right?" But Bernard reports, "There was no tenderness in her voice. It was . . . the voice of a schoolteacher herding a class of busy kids across a busy street." He replies, "I'm all right." But he reports, "We should have been talking and embracing and laughing and loving. We were together again and she was coming home to me and the children. But it wasn't like that . . ." Although Bernard loves Fiona, does she really love him? Might it be that she is incapable of loving anyone but herself?

Literary Precedents

Deighton's Tennis trilogy, begun in 1983, preceded his Fishing trilogy, begun in 1988. In these lengthy and subtle character studies of one man in terms of his profession, we are reminded of French author Romain Holland's ten volume study of a Germanborn musician in *Jean-Christophe* (1906-1912). But apart from the study of a man relative to his profession, Deighton's underlying purpose is not only to lash the "old boy network" in the SIS but also to flay the entire British upper-middle and aristocratic classes whose Victorian world view of Empire he thinks anachronistic in modern times. Deighton appears to believe that the present "governors" of Great Britain are morally irresponsible — if not amoral altogether — as well as being intellectually incompetent to cope with the social decadence and disorder currently ravaging the Western World.

What trilogies or longer studies of fiction Deighton may have modeled his work on — if any — is uncertain at best. The most likely, however, might have been John Galsworthy's two trilogies, *The Forsyte Saga* (1906-1921) and *A Modern Comedy* (1924-1928), both of which satirize the British upper-middle class relative to a particular man, Sommes Forsyte. Another likely influence might have been Evelyn Waugh's trilogy about Great Britain during World War II, *Men at Arms* (1952-1962).

There is also the bitter fictional trilogy by Wyndham Lewis called *The Human Age* (1955-1956). Like Deighton, Lewis was also an artist and was the father of the movement in painting called vorticism. Another trilogy that might have interested Deighton is that of the American John Dos Passes, titled *U.S.A.* (1938), a study of the industrial United States from 1898 to 1929. At any rate, it is clear that following the success of his early "spy novels," which although realistic are still "thrillers," Deighton became more interested in the lengthy exploration of human character. Clearly, he means to pursue this task since he has already issued two volumes of another trilogy concerning Bernard Samson called *Faith* (1994) and *Hope* (1995) with the final volume no doubt being titled *Charity* in which further surprises will be forthcoming.



Related Titles

Deighton's *Winter: A Novel of a Berlin Family* (1987), gives the "historical" background for many of the characters who appear in the Samson trilogies, especially the *Winters* and the *Renasselaers*.

Deighton's latest trilogy designed to tie up the loose ends in the spy career of Bernard Sampson, according to Deighton himself, now consists of *Faith and Hope*), with *Charity* in the offing.

Faith is set in Berlin in 1987, where Sampson is trying to cope with the unexpected return of his wife Fiona, also a spy, who had supposedly been unmasked as a double agent and had consequently defected to East Germany. Now in *Faith* she has unexpectedly "redefected" as part of a lengthy and carefully devised plan by London Central to cause political unrest in East Germany. However, this novel has been criticized as too involuted and lacking in action to be strongly effective, but such a view may depend on a reader choice between interest in action as opposed to characterization.

In *Hope* Sampson is forced to deal with further complications which have arisen from Fiona's redefection. Rumors are circulating that Fiona's sister Tessa, who was thought to have been shot and killed in a firefight on the Autobahn when Fiona's returned from East Germany, is now alive and well in East Germany. Furthermore, Tessa's wealthy businessman husband, George Kosinski, has mysteriously disappeared from his Zurich mansion. And finally, Gloria, the young woman who had lived with Sampson to care for his children in the absence of his wife, and with whom Sampson had fallen in love, has also re-appeared, adding a further complication. Whether Deighton will clear things up in satisfactory fashion in the final volume of the trilogy, *Charity*, remains to be seen.



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