



# A Perfect Spy

*John le Carré*

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John le Carre's classic novels deftly navigate readers through the intricate shadow worlds of international espionage with unsurpassed skill and knowledge, and have earned him unprecedented worldwide acclaim. Immersing readers in two parallel dramas -- one about the making of a spy, the other chronicling his seemingly imminent demise -- le Carre offers one of his richest and most morally resonant novels.

Magnus Pym -- son of Rick, father of Tom, and a successful career officer of British Intelligence -- has vanished, to the dismay of his friends, enemies, and wife. Who is he? Who was he? Who owns him? Who trained him? Secrets of state are at risk. As the truth about Pym gradually emerges, the reader joins Pym's pursuers to explore the unsettling life and motives of a man who fought the wars he inherited with the only weapons he knew, and so became a perfect spy.

## A Perfect Spy Details

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## From Reader Review A Perfect Spy for online ebook

### Wale says

I got through half-way in this book and had to drop it. What did it for me were the long narratives of flashbacks into the main character's past which I suppose were meant to unveil gradually to the reader who the main character really was and the ultimate motives behind his actions. They were quite murky and tedious and I didn't have the patience to really delve into them. In my opinion they detracted from the clarity and fluidity that should be salient traits of any good prose (from the Latin word 'prosa' which means straightforward).

Since this is my first book by Le Carre I'm guessing not all his works try to use this approach and he was simply experimenting with it- which writers should be encouraged to do.

A cold war espionage thriller is meant to be thrilling- this wasn't.

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### AC says

Hmmm. Will have to think about this. Since I knew the ending and the book is long, an element of disaffection. Very rich in character, and in description... literature, not genre, to be sure (as Philip Roth had it).

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### Thomas says

Le Carre does Dickens...but he's not Dickens. There are two intertwined narratives in the book, one describing the main character's background and childhood (which, as has been noted, shares many details with the author's own childhood), the other describing his contemporary dilemma as a spy on the run. The contemporary man-hunt stuff is fun, thrilling, suspenseful; it would have made a good spy novel in itself with a little more development. The sections dealing with the character's childhood are badly over-written and could have been chopped by 150-200 pages - it is great that Le Carre experienced some therapeutic catharsis from getting some of the nasty details of his childhood out on paper, as he has noted in interviews, it just doesn't make for a particularly good spy novel, and the idea in itself is a good one, but it needed to be mercilessly edited. Some claim this is Le Carre's best work, but I would take the economy and more indirect evocation of atmosphere found in *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy* or *The Spy Who Came in From the Cold* any day.

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### Quirkyreader says

This was a brilliant story. At first I wasn't going to give it any stars because it seemed more like a stream of consciousness story and not a novel as we know it. But as I got into the story and its flow, I got sucked in.

And this is a stand alone story. It has nothing to do with Smiley and The Circus. So if you have never read a LeCarre story before, this is a good introduction to his writing style.

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### **umberto says**

I found this novel formidable. As far as I know, the author wrote it based on Kim Philby's life who later defected to the then USSR as a senior citizen there till his death. The title also reminds me of 'A Perfect Crime' I read in an anthology, a book I borrowed from the College of Education Library, BKK.

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### **Warwick says**

Le Carré writes beautifully, let's get that out of the way straight off, but something about this left me a little disappointed. It did have a lot to live up to: not only is it often considered his best work, it's sometimes considered *anyone's* best work. Philip Pullman reckons *A Perfect Spy* is 'one of the finest novels of the twentieth century', while Philip Roth said it was 'the best English novel since the war'. Other Philips also speak highly of it.

It begins with the arrival of a man in a small English village. He is using a false name, he is carrying a mysterious bag, he has apparently just come from a funeral. In a guest room, he sits down to write his story; and thenceforth the book alternates between an espionage thriller that crisscrosses Cold War Europe, and a personal narrative about growing up in postwar Britain.

I found the first of these strands considerably more interesting than the second, which is clearly based on le Carré's own childhood. The book therefore has much autobiographical interest (and had even more before 2016, when le Carré authorised a biography and then wrote his own). Like the book's protagonist, Magnus Pym, le Carré grew up without a mother and in the shadow of a confused relationship with his common father, and the dynamic of this relationship is a major focus of the novel. I mostly found it a distraction, and was anxious to get back to what I felt was the main story.

Part of the problem is that the two parts never really mesh very well. The idea mooted is that growing up with an overbearing confidence trickster as a father has predisposed Pym to a life of international espionage; well, le Carré may have felt this to be true in his own case, but I don't find it very convincing in this novel. It feels like two books have been stapled together.

It's particularly frustrating because the bits that work are so excellent: beautiful descriptions of Europe, in this case mostly Austria and Switzerland ('the spiritual home of natural spies'), a flawless depiction of how diplomats track a potential defector, and the kind of perfect thumbnail character sketches that le Carré is so consistently good at:

She had greying hair bound in a sensible bun and wore a necklace of what looked like nutmeg. When she walked, she waded through her kaftan as if she hated it. When she sat, she spread her knees and scraped at the knuckles of one hand. Yet her beauty clung to her like an identity she was trying to deny and her plainness kept slipping like a bad disguise.

His books are always able to demonstrate exactly how politics boils down to conversations between

frustrated people in drab meeting-rooms. The conversations in le Carré books are the set pieces: they are as exciting as car chases or fistfights, and this book is no different. Much hinges on the cagey relationship between British 'espiocrats' (to use one of le Carré's later coinages) and their CIA counterparts, and the author has a lot of fun contrasting the well-spoken, supercilious clarity of the Brits with the managerial jargon of the Americans:

'...the ah Agency position overall on this thing – at this important meeting, and at this moment in time – is that we have here an accumulation of indicators from a wide range of sources on the one hand, and new data on the other which we consider pretty much conclusive in respect of our unease.'

(This is an affliction that has long since spread to this side of the Atlantic.) At moments like these, I felt inclined to give the book the benefit of the doubt, and was willing myself to like it more than I did. But the flashbacks were just too obtrusive and took too long to get to their point – things don't really get going until a third of the way in, which for a six-hundred-word book is a hell of a long time to make people wait. There is a sneaky sensation that the author was doing this more for himself than for us (he later talked about the book as therapy).

'Love is whatever you can betray,' reflects the main character. 'Betrayal can only happen if you love.' The theme of betrayal – to one's loved ones and to one's country – is a powerful one, even if I felt it got a bit smothered. The book is studded with brilliance – but not perfect, to me, by a long shot.

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### **Simon Mcleish says**

Originally published on my blog here in August 2001.

One of le Carré's non-Smiley novels, *A Perfect Spy* is far more about the psychological pressures which create a secret agent than about the mechanics of spying itself. It is part of le Carré's move away from writing genre thrillers that really began with *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy*.

Magnus Pym is quite a senior operational officer, who has been running networks of British spies in Czechoslovakia for many years. After the death of his father Rick, Pym goes missing, and it begins to look as though he has been a double agent all this time.

His father's death leads Pym to take stock of his life, and he writes its history, principally detailing his relationships with Rick Pym and Czech spy Axel. Some of this is a bit confusing, as in his memoirs Pym refers to himself in the present as "I" and in the past as "Pym". Rick is the formative influence on Pym as a person, and he is the novel's major problem as far as I am concerned. Like Shamus in *The Naive and Sentimental Lover*, he is meant to be charming, but comes across as obnoxious. He is a con-man, with massively grandiose schemes, alternately successful and falling through. The qualities that Magnus inherits from him are the charm and the ability to put together and carry off a successful lie, at least for a time. This, and his allegiance to himself over any patriotic sentiment makes him a perfect spy in the eyes of Axel.

Basically, if you dislike Rick, as I did, the first two thirds of the novel will be heavy going. As far as I am concerned, le Carré is unable to portray charm; it is a difficult characteristic to put across, but all his

characters who are supposed to have it seem to me to be unpleasant, self-centred and unscrupulous. The novel is part of le Carré's ongoing attempt to write like Graham Greene, but he doesn't have that kind of talent.

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### **Lewis Weinstein says**

Years ago I read this and gave it 5\*\*\*\*\*. I tried to re-read it (it's included reading for our Oxford course next summer), but found it disjointed and extremely difficult to follow, with little in the way of cohesive plot. Occasional paragraphs/pages were full of tension and beautifully written but there were not enough of these. I put it aside after 142 pages.

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### **Nancy Oakes says**

I recently found a review of this book (here) that notes that *A Perfect Spy* is a kind of what-if autobiographical account of John LeCarre himself (fictionalized, obviously). Whether this is or is not the case, this is one of the best novels I've read this year.

Magnus Pym, intelligence agent for the British, has gone to London after the news of his father Rick's death. He is supposed to return to Vienna, where he and his wife Mary are currently stationed, but instead he sends his luggage on home without him. When the suitcase arrives, without Magnus, British intelligence is left to wonder whether or not Magnus has defected, taking with him information which is beyond valuable, and jeopardizing the lives of his "joes," or the agents and intelligence network in place in Czechoslovakia. But Magnus is not behind the iron curtain; rather, he's in Devon, along the coast, in a home where he's known as Mr. Canterbury, and where he's been going for some time. This time, he's there to tell his story, racing against time, waiting for his people to come get him and bring him in. He wants to leave a record of the truth, especially for his son, Tom. What he ends up with is the life of Magnus Pym from his childhood on, reflecting especially on his relationship with his father Rick, the ultimate con man, for whom the con never stops, not even with his only son.

While different from other novels by LeCarre, it is still a book that will totally absorb you from start to finish. The characters are very real, the story is not just one story, but several that interweave throughout the novel, and it is just one of those books that you will find difficult to put down.

I'd recommend this to people who like LeCarre's work, as well as those who like stories that focus on the relationships between fathers and sons. It's a long book, but it will go by so quickly that you'll be sorry it's over. Very very good novel; LeCarre is a brilliant writer.

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### **August says**

Philip Roth, himself, claims on the book's cover that it is "the best English novel since the war". I find that hard to believe, but I can understand why Roth would like it. It is structurally sound and Magnus Pym, the perfect spy, is a memorable character. Personally, though, I wasn't really impressed. It is a long book (700 pages), jumping back and forth in time, lots of characters and a narrator who, somewhat schizophrenically, never refers to himself using the first-person singular pronoun. What I'm trying to get

across is that it is not easy to read *A Perfect Spy* and it is all too seldom enjoyable. Because, although the prose is of good quality throughout - and surely much better than in most other works belonging to the spy genre - it never reaches sublime levels and what little there is of humour seldom brought a smile to my face.

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### **Wendy says**

I picked up this book since it was on a list of most influential novels according to one of my issues of Mental Floss magazine, but I just couldn't force myself to get through it. I read about 100 pages of some of the most impenetrable prose, full of confusing switches in point of view, setting, and time period before I set it aside. The army of characters that dropped in like paratroopers made it hard to keep the names straight and at some point, I stopped trying. I just never got into the story.

I always know there's trouble with a story when I have to make myself pick up the book and I'm relieved to put the bookmark in and set it back down. I'm all for novels that make a reader think, but not for those that are written in a deliberately puzzling manner as a challenge for the reader to make sense of before they can even begin to enjoy the story. The author's command of the language is impressive but this book's overly obtuse style is just not for me.

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### **Darwin8u says**

*“Sometimes we have to do a thing in order to find out the reason for it. Sometimes our actions are questions, not answers.”*

? John le Carré, *A Perfect Spy*

Remembrances of loyalties past. In some of le Carré's novels you feel haunted by the ghosts of Conrad, Greene, Nabokov, etc. In 'The Perfect Spy', I went back and forth about whether le Carré was building this novel to be Dickensian spy novel or a Proustian spy novel.

I still haven't quite figured it out. All I know is that it worked. It was brilliant. It was harassed by elements of Proust, Dickens, le Carré's own father, and le Carré himself. In a story about multiple fathers, why can't it be both an ode to Dickens and Proust?

'A Perfect Spy' is a novel about deception (but what spy novel isn't about deception?), memory, love and loyalty. It is a story about the sins of fathers and the absolutions of sons. It is about a character who is on the run without ever leaving a room; a room filled with hidden cabinets, burn boxes, and years and years of secrets and conflict; a room that holds a perfect spy who is running from his past, running from his present, and running from his future.

I've said this before, but I don't ever get tired of preaching it: le Carré is a novelist that WILL be read in 100 years and perhaps in 500 years because he is absolutely tapped into the global zeitgeist of the modern man and the modern nation-state. Le Carré has his finger on the pulse of what we NEED to believe, what we YEARN to believe. He has a story to tell and a map of our often hidden realities.

Le Carré's has baked a madeleine that we eventually all must choke on, because we all eventually get to that point where we refuse to swallow anymore shit.

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### **Fiona says**

The Sunday Times reviewer calls this 'a perfect work of fiction' and le Carre's masterpiece. I can't disagree. This is a fantastic read - a real page turner, intelligently written and often very funny. I'm a fan of JleC's anyway but I'm now in awe of his artistry and expertise in reeling in and hooking his readers. It's not often these days that I struggle to put a book down. My only regret is that I've finished it and will find it a hard act to follow for the depth of the main characters, for its humour and pathos, and for just being such a damn good read.

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### **Helen says**

Let me start this review with these words; this book is devastating. It is the best writing John Le Carre has ever done, and will ever do.

That's not to say that it's a better spy novel than *Tinker Tailor* or *The Spy Who Came in From the Cold*; it's not. If spycraft is what you crave, it's here, but it definitely takes a back seat to everything else. In *A Perfect Spy*, Le Carre's writing rises easily to the level of the 20th Century's greatest authors.

After the death of his father, Magnus Pym, debonair, flawless British spy, has disappeared with the station's burn box. His wife, his son, his handlers, and his friends have no idea where he is, due to the fact that he has doled each of them a different piece of the truth. In the meantime, he has checked himself into a safe house, where he is determined to write a book that will set everything straight.

*A Perfect Spy* is largely autobiographical. Le Carre's mother vanished when he was three, in the same way that Pym loses his mother at an early age. Like Pym's father Rick, Le Carre's father Ronnie Cornwell was a charismatic, larger-than-life con man who spent time in prison. When the young Le Carre wasn't away at various boarding schools, (the tuition sometimes paid for with black market dried fruit), he was palling around with his father's unsavory acquaintances. Like Pym, he worked for the British Secret Service in Switzerland and in Austria and attended Oxford. Pym is a gifted intelligence officer, but he tells everyone that what he really wants to do is write, and good God, how Le Carre writes.

At its heart, this is a book about a boy's relationship with his father. As a parent, I am achingly aware of my responsibility; children are fragile little creatures whose fates depend completely on the mercy of the adults who take care of them. For better and for worse, it is we who teach them what is right, or wrong, or normal. It's we who teach them how to love, and who to trust, it's we who twist and shape their vulnerable little psyches. And it is we who are capable of damaging them the most. Rick loves his son, and his son loves him, and it is painfully clear how this criminally self-absorbed and self-deluding narcissist destroys "the natural humanity" in little Magnus, turning him into the perfect spy of the title. How Le Carre was able to write this stuff down without wetting every page of the manuscript with his tears is a mystery to me.

With all that, the book is surprisingly funny, full of mocking self-deprecation and gorgeous British slang. The facts make wonderful fiction. There are hilarious letters from Rick to his son and lovingly recreated conversations between his father's business associates. It is also surprisingly sexy, as the young Pym navigates between lust and yearning, all things we don't expect from John Le Carre.

*A Perfect Spy* is a breathtaking act of catharsis, warm and funny, wry and rueful, unexpectedly, nakedly human. Instead of burying his painful past, Mr. Le Carre illuminates it for us as a masterpiece of fiction. Happily, he has come to terms with his father, resurrecting him for us with humor and with love.

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## Bettie? says

Description: *Magnus Pym -- son of Rick, father of Tom, and a successful career officer of British Intelligence -- has vanished, to the dismay of his friends, enemies, and wife. Who is he? Who was he? Who owns him? Who trained him? Secrets of state are at risk. As the truth about Pym gradually emerges, the reader joins Pym's pursuers to explore the unsettling life and motives of a man who fought the wars he inherited with the only weapons he knew, and so became a perfect spy.*

A Perfect Spy 1987 BBC Drama Series)

**Episode 1: As a young boy Magnus Pym (played by twins, Jonathan and Nicholas Haley) sees his father Rick (Ray McAnally) imprisoned for embezzlement and his mother Dorothy (Caroline John) hospitalised by the stress. Magnus fakes a fit in order to escape the abusive uncle and alcoholic aunt with whom he has been sent to live. He is rescued from hospital by his recently released father who subsequently takes him along on the con of an elderly lady.**

**Magnus is sent to boarding school after his father is conscripted where staff and students disapprove of the flashy "business man". Rick returns from the war a wealthy man and involves Magnus in a plan to defraud the bomb damage compensation fund. One night Magnus is hazed by a group of boys led by his "friend" Sefton Boyd and in revenge he tags the boy's initials on the wall of the staff toilet.**

**Episode 2: Magnus (Benedict Taylor) is called in to help his father after the plan to defraud the bomb damage compensation fund goes awry. Baroness Weber has asked Rick to help her recover a treasure trove secreted by her late husband before the war and Magnus is sent to accompany her. Upon arrival in Switzerland the Baroness runs up a large bill, absconds with all the money, and leaves Magnus down and out in Bern, in a classic example of the scam known as the Spanish Prisoner.**

**Magnus eventually manages to secure a scholarship to study law at the university in Bern. He befriends a Silesian émigré poet called Axel, who calls him "Sir Magnus". British intelligence officer Jack Brotherhood (Alan Howard) recruits Magnus to inform on a left-wing student group called the Cosmo Club. Magnus steals the club's membership list and Axel is revealed to be a secret member. Jack persuades Magnus to betray his friend to the Swiss authorities**

**Episode 3: Magnus (Peter Egan) is called back from his studies at Oxford University to assist in his father's election campaign. Peggy Wentworth (Frances Tomelty) whose late husband was conned by Rick approaches him. Magnus breaks into his father's files and sends Rick's prison records to Peggy.**

**Confronted at a public meeting Rick brushes off his past misdoings as youthful indiscretions. Aware of his son's betrayal he forgives him none-the-less. However, his hopes of political office are destroyed by the incident.**

**Magnus is recruited into the army and posted as an intelligence officer to Graz. Sabina his translator/mistress puts him in touch with a potential defector who turns out to be Axel. Axel hands over apparently important Soviet secret files on Magnus's guarantee of anonymity, but later when under suspicion requires Magnus to hand over secret British files in return.**

**Episode 4: Rick crashes his son's wedding to Belinda and offers them the gift of a new car, which is immediately impounded. Recruited by the Foreign Office, Magnus is sent to Prague where after making a pick-up from a dead-letter-drop he is arrested by Axel, blackmailed into exchanging further secrets, and reintroduced to Sabina who joins his network of planted agents.**

**Abandoned by his long neglected wife and reposted to Berlin, Magnus begins to court Jack's girlfriend Mary. Late one night he is summoned to police headquarters where he discovers his father is being held in the cells for yet another bungled con job. Axel encourages Magnus into marrying Mary in the belief that the girl may help them gain access to their eventual target, the Americans.**

**Episode 5: Magnus is now married to Mary with a son called Tom and on his long awaited posting to Washington. He is still passing secrets but Axel is talking of retirement as things heat up. A committee of American agents headed by Harry Wexler and guided by Magnus's "friend" Grant Laderer (Garrick Hagon) have noticed some curiosities in the computer analysis of Magnus and his Czechoslovakian networks.**

**Celebrating Christmas with his family, Magnus is called out to a bar where he meets his now destitute father. The committee comes to London to put their suspicions to senior British intelligence officers but Jack dismisses it all as a Czechoslovakian attempt to frame Magnus. Recalled to London and haunted by his past, Magnus, under a false name, takes secret lodgings with Miss Dubber (Peggy Ashcroft) in his old childhood neighbourhood in Devon.**

**Episode 6: While on a family holiday to Corfu, Tom (Graham McGrath) witnesses a meeting between his father and Axel. Axel tries to convince Magnus to retire or even defect but the double agent refuses. Jack recalls Magnus to Vienna where he learns of his father's death. Magnus flies to London where he arranges the funeral and arranges for the collection of his father's files. Mary calls Jack when Magnus fails to return to Vienna.**

**Magnus visits Sefton Boyd (Ian McNeice) and apologises for his first betrayal back at boarding school. Jack goes to Vienna in search of Magnus and interrogates Mary. Magnus retires to his secret lodgings in Devon where he enquires into local comings and goings. Jack searches Magnus's home uncovering references to someone codenamed Poppy and begins to suspect Magnus of betrayal.**

**Episode 7: Jack continues to interrogate Mary to learn more of the mysterious Poppy. Kate admits to Jack that Magnus got her to remove references to Sabine from his personnel file. Recovering the doctored info Jack learns of Magnus's mysterious contact in Graz. Axel passes a message to Mary offering his assistance in tracking the missing Magnus down.**

**Members of Magnus's Czechoslovakian networks start to go silent. Jack realises Prague is rolling up the fake network and the extent of Magnus's betrayal is finally revealed. With both sides now racing**

**to find Magnus, Mary meets with Axel who gives her a clue as to where he is hiding. Jack and Mary drive to Devon where a police siege of Miss Dubber's lodging house ends with a single gunshot. Although the suicide occurs off-screen the final shot is of Magnus in the bathtub with half of his face blown away.**

This was great! The fab episode descriptions are plucked from wiki. The earworm was Underneath The Arches

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