



The Constant Gardener

John le Carré

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Frightening, heartbreaking, and exquisitely calibrated, John le Carre's new novel opens with the gruesome murder of the young and beautiful Tessa Quayle near northern Kenya's Lake Turkana, the birthplace of mankind. Her putative African lover and traveling companion, a doctor with one of the aid agencies, has vanished from the scene of the crime. Tessa's much older husband, Justin, a career diplomat at the British High Commission in Nairobi, sets out on a personal odyssey in pursuit of the killers and their motive. A master chronicler of the deceptions and betrayals of ordinary people caught in political conflict, le Carre portrays, in "The Constant Gardener," the dark side of unbridled capitalism. His eighteenth novel is also the profoundly moving story of a man whom tragedy elevates. Justin Quayle, amateur gardener and ineffectual bureaucrat, seemingly oblivious to his wife's cause, discovers his own resources and the extraordinary courage of the woman he barely had time to love.

"The Constant Gardener" is a magnificent exploration of the new world order by one of the most compelling and elegant storytellers of our time.

The Constant Gardener Details

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Author : John le Carré

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Darwin8u says

"The most peaceable people will do the most terrible things when they're pushed."

? John le Carré, The Constant Gardener

I have been a little reluctant to read le Carré's post-Cold War, post-Smiley novels. Part of my reluctance was borne of some false assumption that le Carré's masterpieces were mostly weighted towards the front end of his brilliant career. 'The Constant Gardener' blew all my assumptions up. It is amazing how le Carré can write such a masterful novel and such a popular book. Many of the MFA literary novels published during the last thirty years will quickly slump and dissolve into the dust of mediocrity, but I am certain this novel (along with many of le Carré's earlier novels: the Perfect Spy, the Karla Trilogy, the Spy Who Came in From the Cold, the Russia House) WILL be read in three hundred+ years.

Le Carré is amazing. He doesn't fall into the easy path. Yes, Big Pharma is bad, but not in some monolithic/caricatured way. It doesn't just do evil, but does many things that are good. This is le Carré's style. There is infinite shading that he does with EVERYTHING. Each character is shaded, and mirrors each other character. Some characters are flipped, some are mirrored, some are distortions, but each character is complicated, nuanced and difficult to view from one position. Le Carré writes with an artistry that makes it impossible to not love the good, despite their faults, and still appreciate the human-like frailties of the bad.

A good friend of mine (who has ghostwritten several bestsellers the last couple years) calls this novel the greatest love story of the last fifty years. I find that claim difficult to dispute. It isn't a traditional love story, and not exactly a happy love story, but it is an amazing story of loyalty, love and understanding that leaves the reader both tired and sated.

If one day I discovered I could write a novel that was just 1/2 as good as 'The Constant Gardener', I would think I had been blessed with a masterpiece.

Jota-p says

Começamos a ler este livro e percebemos logo que Le Carré tem uma forma de narrar muito própria, complexa e algo densa, com analepses dentro de analepses, o que exige de nós alguma concentração para não perdermos o fio à meada e compreendermos a história. Além disso, é necessário ter muita atenção, pois há imensas personagens.

Para dizer a verdade, pensei que me ia deparar nestas páginas com uma história romancizada melodramática (nunca tinha lido nada de John Le Carré antes), por isso foi interessante descobrir que me enganei redondamente. Trata-se, isso sim, de um thriller "político" que pretende denunciar os males do capitalismo desenfreado e a "procura irresponsável do lucro [que] está a destruir o globo". Claro que no fim, o autor nos alerta para o facto de ser uma história inventada, não-verídica. Mas também é verdade que Le Carré diz que "à medida que continuava a minha viagem pela selva farmacêutica, fui percebendo que, em comparação com a realidade, a minha história é tão inofensiva como um postal de férias", o que é de nos

deixar com os cabelos em pé... Uma expressão irónica recorrente é "numa sociedade civilizada", o que mostra perfeitamente a crítica patente a todo o livro. Além disso, somos confrontados com uma questão eticamente relevante: a morte de um africano é menos importante que a de um europeu ou americano?

Até ao capítulo Dez, a história demora algum tempo a arrancar. O autor demora-se a desenvolver as bases da história (os primeiros capítulos são algo penosos e é necessária alguma paciência), pois perde-se em pormenores quase insignificantes que, se por um lado ajudam a fazer um completo enquadramento da trama, por outro tornam-na demasiado prolixa, o que não facilita a compreensão da história. Mas a partir do Capítulo Dez, alcançamos a velocidade de cruzeiro e já ninguém nos pára: começamos a perceber tudo melhor e queremos ver como é que a história vai acabar.

E se, no princípio, não simpatizamos muito com a personagem Tessa, à medida que a história vai evoluindo, essa primeira impressão acaba por desaparecer e acabamos por admirá-la. Ficamos mesmo sensibilizados com a sua "luta contra uma grande injustiça", a qual o marido não abandona. Revi-me, em certos aspectos, na personagem Justin. Aliás, julgo que é impossível ficarmos indiferentes a todas as personagens, seja pela humanidade e actos de boa vontade de umas, seja pelos maus actos de outras.

Gostei muito de ler este livro, cujo final não podia ser diferente daquele que nos é apresentado, e recomendo-o vivamente. O filme realizado por Fernando Meirelles também é muito bonito e interessante.

Michael says

This is one of LeCarre's best novels--especially impressive because he's out of his usual Cold War milieu. But the narrative drive, the simmering anti-corporate anger, are all there. Also, the opening paragraph is a marvel: precise, engaging, suspenseful, and a quick character sketch, all in one.

Quirkyreader says

So far, out of all the LeCarre books that I have read at this point, this has been one of my favourites.

It was a very heart wrenching story that featured a journey. And that journey was a man discovering how much his late wife truly loved him. And the work she was partaking in that she kept hidden from him. Going through this journey he loved her even more.

It was also a novel of intrigue and espionage based around the pharma industry in Africa.

Try and find a copy of this incredible story.

Eric_W says

One of the reviewers on Amazon complained that this book had little to do with gardening. Good grief!

I think Le Carre has made the transition from Cold War spy novels to contemporary issue thrillers quite

handsomely. In this book, he really goes after the pharmaceutical companies, accusing them not only of unethical practices using Africans as guinea pigs, but also suggests they would kill anyone whom might deign to challenge their unholy hegemony.

It's also truly a great love story. The relationship of trust and reliance that emerges gradually through the course of the novel between Tessa and Justin is really wonderful. Unusual perhaps; striking, nevertheless.

This is a tale of grand corruption on an international scale but also a celebration (albeit tragic) of the idealistic individual. But I warn you, it's a dark tale.

Wanda says

****2018 Summer of Spies****

So its summer, finally and at last, here in the Great White North. It's time for some summer fun reading about espionage! This is my first venture into Le Carré's work and I enjoyed it.

I had expected a rather light & frothy thriller and instead I got a serious examination of big pharma—its use of the unfortunate as test subjects and its desire to put profit well ahead of human kindness. Also explored is the nature of colonialism in Kenya, reminding me a bit of *The Poisonwood Bible*. Heavy subjects for a popular novel!

I also got a reminder on the nature of marriage—those of us on the outside of a marriage really have no idea what's happening on the inside. On the outside, Sandy and Gloria Woodrow look like the stable, steady couple and Justin and Tessa Quayle look like a precarious, unmatched union. The book begins from Sandy Woodrow's point of view and quickly disabuses the reader of the notion that his marriage is solid. Woodrow's constant search for sex outside his marriage was tiresome and it was a relief when I reached the point where Le Carré switched to Justin's POV. There we discover that, far from being unstable, Justin and Tessa trusted and loved each other a great deal.

Thereafter followed the labyrinthine machinations that I had been expecting. Who knows what, who is hiding something, what can be done about it all? I can definitely see why *The Guardian* lists it as one of their 1000 recommended books.

Zanna says

I made rapid progress through this long book thanks to an intriguing plot, empathy with the protagonists, a serious socio-political backdrop and plenty of interesting peripheral characters.

Le Carre has been very careful to make Tessa and her husband Justin humble, passionate and self-effacing, since the role of White Saviour in Africa is, to say the least, problematic. Tessa is almost beyond reproach, and the book was overly morally comfortable for me with its predictably ignorant, self-interested colonial officials, dubiously spiritual white aid workers, insidiously amoral big pharma, naive-but-intelligent-and-incorruptible mixed-race admin staff, prophetic African wise women and so on, and even the pessimistic

conclusion had me nodding sagely along, emotionally affected but unperturbed in my beliefs...

As critique perhaps this is unfair - there is enough discomfort in this sad book to make it a good and serious read, and doubtless its targets are broadly the right ones. But the message *I* took, and felt dissatisfied with, was that the well-meaning white person (that scourge of the Earth that is every irresponsible and ignorant one of us) is off the hook, and in any case helpless, in the face of corporate injustice in Africa.

Solistas says

Πολυπρ?σωπη, καθηλωτικ? αφ?γηση απ'τον μαιτρ στα καλ?τερ? του. Στα συν η Κ?νυα που βρ?σκεται στο προσκ?νιο (κ ε?ναι η χ?ρα-κ?λλημα φ?τος), ?τι ε?χα στα χ?ρια μου ?να ταλα?πωρο Bell?κι που ε?χα βρει για 1ε στην Αμοργ? πριν 2 χρ?νια (τα ε?χα βρει σχεδ?ν ?λα) κ ?τι δεν θυμ?μουν τ?ποτα απ'την ταιν?α κ το δι?βαζα με κομμ?νη την αν?σα.

Απ?θανο.

Bmbs says

In the 60's I distinctly remember reading two of the authors earlier books, *The Spy Who Came in From the Cold* and *The Looking Glass War*. With no pun intended I read them in a small town in Germany, a town located not too far distant from where the fictitious events of the stories took place. They were really good books.

Returning to him some 40 years later proved, for me, something of a disappointment. There is only a fleeting reference to gardening so horticulturist need not get their hopes up but the subject matter of the book is interesting enough and although it is a work of fiction I am sure, as the book points out, that there is indeed a dark underside to the multi national pharmaceutical industry. One that might be uncomfortable for us, the consumers, to know about. However if it was his intention to enlighten us then a one hour TV documentary would have done the job better as at 508 pages it's about 100 too long. I skipped 20 of the last 25 and I don't believe I missed out on much.

I didn't find the characters too believable, far too many of them anyway, and the way we are asked to believe that a husband, a high ranking diplomat, had no idea that his wife was rampaging through Kenya righting wrongs on behalf of us all, without him having any knowledge of her activities is quite absurd.

Might be one of those rare occasions when the film is better than the book.

Kaitlin Turner says

My first impression of the book was not good. The beginning was slow, and seemed like something my Dad might read; something mundane and unoriginal with cheap thrills. I kept on though, and soon found myself completely enthralled. I could not have been more wrong. Not only does *The Constant Gardener* deliver clever suspense and thrills, but it also has a strong emotional pull. The strongest part of the book is probably

its intelligent and complex plot which involves major pharmaceutical companies. I was both compelled and horrified by what I learned about pharmaceutical companies. Furthermore, the book holds a lot of cultural analysis, which I found to be both true and insightful.

Le Carre has an incredible strength for details which not only allows the plot to soar, but also gives the reader incredibly scenery and characterization. This strength for details is also what allows him to give such strong and interesting cultural analysis, and make it seem like you can actually see all of the interactions taking place. I couldn't recommend this book more.

Maciek says

I've been hearing great things about John Le Carre, so I picked up *The Constant Gardener*. I knew nothing about the book, except that it was made into a movie which got good reviews.

I can't say I was floored. The plot is pretty transparent to everyone but the protagonist, who would know immediately what's going on if he'd read the back cover blurb. Instead of being a thriller full of unexpected twists and turns, the reader has to wait for the protagonist to catch up. When the plot drags behind the reader, the book soon becomes a tedious, plodding read. I was left hoping for a twist, a surprise of any sort - and there wasn't any. The entire plot relies on the reader's sympathy for the character who cannot guess the obvious. It's difficult to believe his lack of knowledge on certain subjects, such as his wife's activities. Although this is a work of fiction, the approach to the subject was surprisingly superficial and unenlightening. Perhaps I was expecting too much?

Pages after pages devoted to characterization soon become redundant when the character's actions did not match the plot. Along with the protagonist, the reader is forced to learn about computers, e-mails, etc...easily 100-150 pages could have been scrapped, and the novel would be much more tight and suspenseful, if predictable. The opening and details of the crime are all well written and saturated with emotion - if only the whole book was like that!

To be fair to Le Carre, his writing is elegant and it's obvious that he's a seasoned novelist who knows his chops, though for some reason did not use them here. I will read his other works, but I will not re-read this one. Not a good introduction to the man I'm afraid. 2,5 stars.

Chris says

Yeah, this isn't the best Le Carre. The beginning of the book was quite engrossing, and then it is like it takes a right turn. The husband's investigation is just annoying on some levels. 3 stars because of the beginning.

Fran says

I had never read anything by John Le Carre before. I thoroughly enjoyed this book. He is a masterful writer who develops interesting characters and describes scenes with poetic intensity. This is the sort of book I could see myself rereading in years to come. There is so much in it. Clearly the author is so much more than a spy novelist.

Supratim says

Let me begin by saying that this book is not just a thriller! It is much more than that. In the guise of a thriller the novel tells the story of how money and power can crush the voices of the good people who try to fight injustice.

The story begins with a scene in the British High Commission in Nairobi, Kenya. The Head of Chancery, Sandy Woodrow, is informed about the murder of Tessa Quayle – a humanitarian and wife of a British diplomat, Justin Quayle, posted in the High Commission.

Justin is our “*constant gardener*” : a man who *"loves nothing better than toiling in the flowerbeds on a Saturday afternoon - a gentleman , whatever that means - the right sort of Etonian, courteous to a fault ..."*.

I personally found Tessa to be the most striking character in the novel. We start knowing about her in flashbacks. A beautiful, young woman who was born in a wealthy family, Tessa had no interest in enjoying her wealth. She was a true believer in justice and humanity, a person who fought against the mighty corporates that were exploiting the most vulnerable sections of the Africans. These corporates were using the poor defenseless Africans as guinea pigs while they tried their drug on them, before the said medication could be launched in the lucrative markets of the West. The deaths of the victims were a thing to be brushed under the carpet.

Tessa’s fight brought her in conflict with a pharma giant, and guess what – the corrupt Kenyan government and the British government were not only mute spectators to this crime, but in collusion with ensuring that the affair did not come to light.

Tessa was murdered while travelling with Dr. Arnold Bluhm, a charismatic Belgian “black” who was her fellow activist and supposed lover. Arnold would go missing, and the powers that be would put the blame on this gentleman’s shoulders.

The callous press would have a field day in tarnishing the image of this good man, and Justin would emerge as a cuckolded husband. After all, Tessa was much younger than Justin and Arnold was her close friend and confidant.

Tessa’s death would make Justin embark on a journey: to carry on with Tessa’s fight against injustice and in the course he would also learn so much more about his late wife. Justin, the mild gentleman, would go AWOL, learn to live like a spy and travel across continents trying to collect evidence. He would be helped by some really brave individuals, who were themselves harassed and persecuted for protesting against the pharma giant.

The pharma giant won’t sit idle: using their influence with the government, hackers and thugs they would try to destroy all evidence against them, attack Justin in an effort to stop him. But, deriving strength from the memory of his wife Justin would soldier on.

The book talks about a very serious issue in the form of a thriller and is superbly written with complex characterizations and clever plotting. The author says that the book is a result of extensive research. It did drag a bit at times, but I am fine with that. Le Carre is famous for his Cold War novels, but this one is

excellent. The author admits that he is not against pharmas. They do a lot of good too, he also says that “ *my story is as tame as a holiday postcard.*”

If you are looking for a “*high octane; adrenaline pumping*” adventure, then book is not for you. It is the moving tale of one man’s quest for justice and a feeling of bereavement pervades the narrative.

I would recommend this novel to people who love reading good books.

Gary says

It is difficult to find fault with this book, so I won't try. I have always enjoyed Le Carre's work, partly because he has connections that enable him to find out about things that are not usually talked about publicly; partly because his writing is sublime.

Mr Le Carre knows how to tell a story and this is one of his best. It builds slowly but surely to its shocking but almost inevitable conclusion and the way it's done keeps you reading with interest to the end. The end itself leaves you a bit more cynical, a bit sad and with the feeling that you cannot fight the system, in this case governments and big business in league together. Perhaps in league is too strong: one government is mostly corrupt and the other turns a blind eye because it is expedient and helps their own country's companies.

The story concerns what the giant pharmaceutical companies will do to protect their profits and what governments will do to protect big business (and, therefore, their campaign funds and economic prosperity). I won't go into too much detail but it aint pretty and people get hurt - and dead. The people who suffer the most are the poor people of Africa, who are being used as guinea pigs to test a drug that has not been trialed for long enough and kills people in its present, unrefined form. They have no choice but to trust the doctors and aid workers who hand out the drug, as they have no alternative for an informed second opinion.

The tale also covers the gravy train that is international aid. The aid employees range from those on the ground, who know that without the bribes that all the local officials must have they will be chucked out, and those at the top who attend multiple conferences all round the world and enjoy a lavish lifestyle as a result.

One of the main characters is dead as it begins. She had discovered what was happening; she was gathering evidence and lobbying to try to stop it and bring the culprits to book. Now she's dead and her husband is left to pick up the pieces of his life - and hers. Are martyrs brave and selfless in our interests or fools fighting an unwinnable war? Take your pick.

Although this story is about a British company (among others) and the British and Kenyan governments, it could be anyone really. After all, if we don't, the Americans will, right?

Read it and educate yourself - and have a thoroughly enjoyable read, btw. Marvellous. Thank you Mr Le Carre.

Jim says

For tuberculosis sufferers, Dypraxa was supposed to be the Holy Grail. Pharma giant Karel Vita Hudson (KVH) had so much confidence in it coming out of the gate that they made it widely available in Africa, with disastrous results. Tessa Quayle and her friend Arnold Bluhm MD wage a two-man war against the ravages of the drug.

When Quayle is murdered and Bluhm disappears, things start to happen. Tessa's husband, John Quayle, a Foreign Office functionary, suddenly disappears and, under false ID, pursues his wife's crusade on his own. The Foreign Office is 100% behind KVH (you know, jobs), and Quayle must avoid his employers as well as KVH's thugs, who are out to get him.

Even after the fall of Communism, author John le Carré is able to retain interest in other evil aspects of the global situation, in this case the greed of Big Pharma. *The Constant Gardener* is one of his best books in this post Berlin Wall era. Smiley might not be involved, but the hitherto mouselike character of John Quayle undergoes a sea change before our eyes, as we follow his footsteps with bated breath.

Sheila says

My first Le Carre, so I was expecting to be thrilled, something cat-and-mouse type of story. After all, someone killed Justin Quayle's wife while she's on a perfectly justifiable, if not very dangerous mission. And it was not a quick death like an assassination----she was stripped naked, possibly raped, had bruises all over her body, and her throat was slashed.

Meaning: It's the kind of injustice that forces Justin to go on a global hunt for the answers.

But the ending is just too sad for me. Too pessimistic. It's Thomas Hardy without a touch of beauty of realism.

What was the point of having Justin suffer the same bruises along the way if someone else will have to fight for him too in the end?

But...I must remember myself. I haven't written 18 books like John Le Carre on the year he published *The Constant Gardener*. There are some good things about the novel.

One of them is Justin himself, who talks to the ghost of his wife and summons her from memory while on his deceitful journey. It reveals the relationship they had, her secrecy, his adoration, their ordinary, but now tender moments.

Other characters are interesting in that they are not there to serve as background. They actually do something to move the story.

As for Africa itself as the location, Le Carre satisfies us with lots of usual imagery from the loyal servants, the bereaved and disadvantaged youth, to the suffering African women.

But the book is not about Africa. It's about Justin, the wronged man and husband, and a reluctant spy.

Is it a story of bravery and passion as he becomes determined to walk in the way that his wife once walked? Yes.

Is it a story on how to fight corrupt multinational corporations? No. Definitely not.

There's this part where Justin meets Tessa's contact in Hippo (Hippocrates) and he laughs when he sees her carrying her toddler on her bike---he wasn't expecting to be an Uncle for the afternoon. I like Justin laughing even if he's grieving. He's a likable character, which makes me sad more.

Le Carre has been likened to Charles Dickens, which makes him a writer to read if only to draw comparisons and distinctions.

Meaning: He owns the space for 3 to 5 more books on my shelf.

Book Rave

I know the film. Haven't watched it. But I saw Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy and I liked the psychological drama, which from experience, is better appreciated when digested in its written form. But what finally persuaded me to grab a copy of this book, ten years after it was published, is the word it used in its back cover: *ennobled*. I haven't read that word before, not in the few John Grisham and Jeffery Deaver mystery thrillers I've consumed. It excites the lexophile in me. *A man ennobled by his wife's tragic murder...* I've read that a good writer has this skill of choosing one word instead of another. John Le Carre chose the word ennobled. He chose it well.

Leslie says

One of my favourite Le Carre novels, right up there with *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold* and the Smiley books. It works on every level: as a thriller, as suspense fiction, as character study, as social and economic critique. Truly moving and compelling.

Maura says

I think this is the only time in my life I've actually liked the movie better than the book, but perhaps my expectations were too high (I hadn't read or heard of LeCarré before this). Basically I'd thought that since it was about pharmaceutical company conspiracies to test drugs on poor Africans and kill people who get in their way, I'd love it... I was wrong, but maybe I shouldn't have been so surprised.

I felt Le Carré didn't address the pharmaceutical issue with enough depth, and focused too much on making the main character, Justin, run all over the world, trying to solve the mystery of his wife's murder. I also never really warmed up to Justin; he started out as a spineless bureaucrat, and didn't develop or grow much—he ended up merely as a *regretful* spineless bureaucrat. Le Carré also threw in a weird religious character at the end, which felt completely random and disjointed from the rest of the book.

Overall, Le Carré's writing was a bit too Dan Brown-ish for me—meaning that the book was too exciting to put down, but I was constantly irritated by his typical “beautiful smart woman” and “nerdy middle-aged man” characters. If you're looking for a page-turner, this is definitely worth a read, but if you're looking for a substantive manifesto against the pharmaceutical industry (and yes, I do realize I might be the only weirdo in the world looking for this in a novel), you'll be disappointed.

Krista says

What a tedious read!! This book was about 300 pages too long. The topic should have been interesting but LeCarre found a way to make it boring. I also watched the movie in the hopes that it would improve my opinion of the book. Didn't work.
