



# The Looking Glass War

*John le Carré*

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## **The Looking Glass War** John le Carré

John le Carré'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.

**THE LOOKING GLASS WAR** Once upon a time the distinction had been clear: the Circus handled all things political while the Department dealt with matters military. But over the years, power shifted and the Circus elbowed the Department out. Now, suddenly, the Department has a job on its hands. Evidence suggests Soviet missiles are being positioned close to the German border. Vital film is missing and a courier is dead. Lacking active agents, but possessed of an outdated mandate to proceed, the Department has to find an old hand to prove its mettle. Fred Leiser, German-speaking Pole turned Englishman -- once a qualified radio operator, now involved in the motor trade -- must be called back to the colors and sent East....

## **The Looking Glass War Details**

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Author : John le Carré

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# From Reader Review *The Looking Glass War* for online ebook

## Andre says

There is a valuable lesson in this book: when an author uses a novel's introduction to suggest it may be his worst, believe him. Of the four books I've written by John le Carré, *The Looking Glass War* is clearly the worst. le Carré seems to have issues carrying his stories when the plot is not singularly focused, when he is trying to make a negative point about some aspect of British culture. We saw this when le Carré tackled the prep school system in *A Murder of Quality*, and this time the author tries to express his disgust with the disorganization and second-rate stature of the British Intelligence system.

*The Looking Glass War* is divided into three primary sections: Taylor's Run, Avery's Run, and Leiser's Run. Taylor's Run and Leiser's Run are each divided into three subsections: Prelude, Take-Off, and Homecoming. After Taylor's Run, this novel does not again get remotely interesting until the Take-Off Section of Leiser's Run, the sixth of the seven total sections. Everything in between is a meandering tale of British Intelligence infighting and inferiority complex.

The characters are not at all compelling. le Carré spends a lot of time whining about the characters' wives (they are all annoying and undermining). Every single one of the married men is brought down in some way by his wife. The men are all intelligence officers, but their wives all demand to know the job secrets, and the men always tell them.

George Smiley, of course, is not married. His wife left him in the first novel, so he and Adrian Haldane, another unmarried man, are the only ones able to maintain a level head. It is clear that even more than women, le Carré hates marriage. And his love for Smiley is so over the top. He goes out of his way to show how much in love he is with the character he created.

The other big takeaway from *The Looking Glass War* is one I'm not certain le Carré intended. Leiser is a British immigrant from Poland. Years earlier than the events of this novel, Leiser worked as a spy during World War II. As he's thrust back into action, we readers get to see intimate details of his interactions with very important British men he's meeting for the first time. The way le Carré writes both Leiser's feelings and those of the British officers during their interactions, I can see that the author is a believer in British superiority. Leiser is not and can never be a true Briton; he's a Pole. He is less than them. They know it. He knows it. And no one ever needs to voice it because it is a given. And, in the world of the characters and the author, it is just.

No, I did not like this book. But I have completed all four novels that precede the Karla trilogy. My hope is that the singular focus of a case that spans three novels will take le Carré's writing back to what he does best. We'll see how it goes.

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## Bruce Snell says

Book four in the George Smiley series by John Le Carre. This is a difficult book for me to rate. The end result is a brilliant condemnation of bureaucrats and their willingness to put their rules ahead of people. However, to get to that end result, we are forced to read over 250 pages of bureaucracy - and that is as enjoyable as a day wasted at the DMV.

In this case British military intelligence - staffed by a bunch of surviving WWII intelligence officers (remember this is set in 1963) decide to run an operation in East Germany. Rather than turn it over to "the Circus" who was equipped and trained for such an op, they recruit another WWII has been and send him behind the Iron Curtain. In the end, there is no way this fiasco can end except badly - and the people in charge demonstrate their devotion to the bureaucracy by abandoning their man.

As I said, the brilliant message is buried under the bureaucracy, and after a lifetime spent working in the bureaucracy, it was too much to ask. For a person looking for the message, rather than the method of storytelling, this could be a great book. For me, not so much.

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## Jaksen says

No rating, didn't finish. Didn't enjoy reading this, put me to sleep at times. And I do like Mr. le Carre, i really do. Just not this book.

I should also add I won this book through the Goodreads giveaway program. Thank you, Goodreads!

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## Szplug says

I cannot recall the exact age I was when I read this minimalist piece perfectly executed by the talented le Carré, but whatever it was—and around 15 years old sounds about right—it served as effective an eye-opener to reality as a set of clamps fixed upon what were previously orbs dreaming away behind sealed lids. At that time, my fictional intake was comprised of a not inconsiderable proportion of espionage thrillers—the sprawling series by Ian Fleming and Robert Ludlum primarily, but sprinkled in were a few of Pendleton's *Mack Bolan* and textualizations of the *Man From U.N.C.L.E.* franchise. These were all, more-or-less, well-written and entertaining enough to have sufficed at that age, and while the exoticness of the locales, the menacingly debonair airs of the various protagonists, their victories over impossible odds, the cunning double- and triple-crosses put into effect by jousting opponents, were all at a level ramped-up sufficiently to telegraph their fictionality, the covert world of spies and secret agents was given a sense of inherent power and importance, competence and peril, technological marvels and physical derring-do, that grafted their way onto its existence in the real world. This was all *there*: at a more subdued level, carried out in a less explosive manner—but the stakes *were* high, the operators *were* top-notch professionals, and the agencies that employed them *were* sophisticated and ultra-competent, with their shadowy, subterranean tendrils spread dexterously about an unsuspecting world. Indeed, even today, decades after this world of ghosts and specters was delineated in modes and means far closer to the actual truth of things by such as le Carré, it is the preferred form for its treatment, whether on paper, television set, or cinematic screen: larger-than-life, physically perfect specimens perform acts of death-defying acrobatics and stunt-work while exhibiting a feral and unerring lethality, all in an effort to avert the apocalyptic outcomes of the fiendishly clever, logically precise, and temporally taut plots of whatever respective villainous mind has set out to assert their will upon the world they would rule.

So it was that *The Looking Glass War*, this thin, unprepossessing book with its somewhat tacky, boxy red cover, struck me quite forcefully with the banality, the absurdity, the futility, and the morbidity that permeated nigh everything and everyone involved—with one centrally important exception—in its elegantly precise unwinding. Here was an intelligence agency—euphemized as *The Department*—peopled by

creaking, ossified civil servants, pining nostalgically for the brief snatches of glory they had worked back in the old days of the Second World War and desperate to proclaim their collective relevance in the face of blatant Yankee superiority, rival institution triumphant supersession, and Warsaw Pact opacity. A lucky bit of informational unearthing—details of an alleged transfer of Soviet nuclear missiles to a secret East German military installation—seems to have given this British death-bed unit an opportunity to set their mark in confusing and confounding times; sparked these moribund fossils into energetic planning and plotting, in which a previously successful wartime operative, a Polish patriot named Leiser currently residing in England as a newly-married citizen, is brought out of mothballs and set through training procedures deemed sufficient to allow him to infiltrate the heavily guarded East German border and become their Johnny-on-the-Spot missile spotter. Alas, the acquired information appears to have been compromised right from the start, and *Departmental* cockups and bollixing unfold with enough depressing regularity to lead the reader to suspect the ailing, rusty intelligence agency running things of being a front for Ringling Brothers. In the face of accumulated failure—including the misfortune that forced Leiser to kill an East German border guard—George Smiley, a young turk serving a liason role between the agent-running anachronism and the freshly scrubbed, newly-minted *Circus* operating in the Big Time from London, convinces the former to pull the plug on the botched operation. Unfortunately, this news doesn't get through to the game but desperate Leiser, whose very transmissions allow the East Germans to pinpoint his location and bring their soldiers to bear on him with force. Worst of all? The missiles, in all likelihood, were never actually intended for that particular East German destination to begin with. It was all part of the cynical and ultimately pointless game-within a game-within a game that comprises the grim theatre of espionage in a world bifurcated between two ideologically-opposed nuclear powers.

Whatever illusions are carried into this book by the reader will be hard pressed to survive through to the end. This is a bleakly cynical, unrelentingly depressing tale, the textual equivalent of a fortnight of drizzling rain, sullen cloud blankets, and empty, tipped-over gin bottles. Le Carré works quickly, almost effortlessly here, not without compassion, but never glossing things up to any degree; it's a spartan operation, the authorial blade gleaming with the wickedly sharp edges brought to bear upon this rotten object he intends to give form. The entirety of the *Department's* operation, while not without a few strained traces of important endeavor and heroic effort (especially on the part of the doomed-from-the-outset Leiser), is primarily conducted with an earnest energy not quite sufficient to overcome the creaking lethargy of redundancy and the ridiculousness of this agency's esteem-reclaiming theatrics. As anyone who has read such as Tim Weiner's *Legacy of Ashes* knows, well-meaning but compromised and ignorant operators like Frank Wisner ran several assets on fatal missions into communist Europe, unaware that his opponents knew more about the agent's whereabouts than he did; and in *The Looking Glass War* le Carré has crafted herein a British cadre equivalent to Wisner: well-intentioned but riddled with the failures gestated within by their wounded pride, their deflated egos, and their inability to admit their own limitations and outdatedness. Of course, it is Leiser who will pay the ultimate price for their incompetent hubris, leaving them the comparative benefaction of a retirement to their clubs, their culpability routinely assuaged by another round of drinks and further retreat into the glory days when the lads had the rotten old Nazis on the run. As le Carré saw it, espionage was just another realm of government bureaucracy, subject to all the absurd laws of such and tending to be populated by the usual proportion of time-servers, power-seekers, ego-strokers, and lifeline-cutters, while perhaps more prone than most to overreach, the corrupting influence of money, and the despair engendered by their competition's comparative advantages. There is nothing here that speaks of glamor or steeliness—but I'll be damned if it didn't make an impression to outlast that of all the thrill-rides.

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**Tim says**

Spies like Us without the humour.

John le Carré followed up the success of *The Spy who came in from the Cold* with a different take on the spying game - *The Looking Glass War*. Le Carré turned everything on its head by showing us the bumbling fools of The Department - an old boys club of war veterans who think they can revitalise their careers with a dash of espionage. It was not well received.

For me the story could have made a great caper, if John le Carré had the comedy writing chops. But he plays it straight, and it just doesn't work. There's no tension, there's no intrigue, there are no jaw dropping twists - all the ingredients that made *The Spy who Came in from the Cold* so electric are gone. In its place we get the long, drawn out preparations for a mission that is clearly a fraud from the beginning. Even the more gripping chapters where the agents are in the field jag on tedious technical detail - seemingly added as filler or to add authenticity but creating unnecessary ballast for a story that is already floundering.

Just as the novel seems to be drawing to a tenser conclusion than it really deserves, Le Carré drops in one of several paragraphs like this, bringing the action to a jarring halt.

"Next he attached aerial and earth to their terminals, led the earth wire to the water pipe and fastened the two strands to the cleaned surface with tabs of adhesive plaster. Standing on the bed, he stretched the aerial across the ceiling in eight lengths, zig-zag as Johnson had instructed, fixing it as best he could to the curtain rail or plaster on either side. This done, he returned to the set and adjusted the waveband switch to the fourth position, because he knew that all the frequencies were in the three-megacycle range. He took from the bed the first crystal in the line, plugged it into the far left-hand corner of the set, and settled down to tune the transmitter, muttering gently as he performed each movement. Adjust crystal selector to 'fundamental all crystals', plug in the coil; anode-tuning and aerial-matching controls to ten."

The only interesting character in the whole novel is George Smiley himself, but despite this being his "fourth" book he barely gets a look-in, dropping in near the beginning and end of the story. A real disappointment.

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## **Jim Pfluecke says**

Man, this is one depressing book. As the author states in the intro, this book is a cynical look at the intelligence/spy world and is almost a parody of LeCarre's first big hit, *The Spy Who Came in From the Cold*.

With subtle (and a few not so subtle) hints of the ridiculous attempts by past-their prime and out of touch military intelligence officers to recover their relevancy and stage one last mission, the book is a slowly building tragedy. You know it is not going to end well nearly from the start. In contrast to most spy novels, these guys just don't quite have it all together, although they present a confident front.

As with most of his early books, he combines cynicism of the cold war, a critic of 1960's British class issues, and discussion of human nature to create real, compelling characters and, in this case, realistic situation that slowly unfolds as a farce instead of a triumph.

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## Andrew Davis says

Admittedly, a weakest of John LeCarre's I've read so far. A splint group of MI5 decides to send a war time intelligence officer to East Germany to follow up on some signs of Russian presence in a small town. They choose a polish refugee of german extraction. Most of the book involves his training and politics around the organisation. At the end he crosses the border and kills the border guard on his way. Pretty quickly is tracked down by German intelligence. At the end we learn that the British intelligence selected him because of his war history and because they could provide him with an old radio transmitter, so in case he were to be caught they would say it was all set up by the German intelligence and deny everything. The action takes place most likely just before the Russian invasion of Hungary in 1956.

### Characters:

- John Avery - young intelligence agent
- Anthony Avery - his son
- Sarah Avery - his wife
- Berry - a cypher clerk
- Dell - a major, runs a club for ex-servicemen
- Dennison - an agent
- Fritsche -German railwayman. Defector
- Jimmy Gorton - a representative in Hamburg
- Adrian Haldane - an agent doing research
- Jack Johnson - radio operator. Woodford asking for him in his ex-servicemen club.
- Lansen - a pilot flying to Dusseldorf. Having made a low flight over DDR and picked up by Russian fighter jets maneg to get to Dusseldorf.
- Leclerc - an agent in London who sent Taylor to pick up the film.
- Leiser - Polish contact, pseudo Mayfly
- Sandy Lowe - called randy Sandy. Woodford was asking about him in his club.
- McCulloch - an agent
- Malherbe - Leclerc's friend, presumably dead
- Pine - clerk in the office
- Sandford - an administration clerk
- Smiley - old hand at the circuit.
- Sutherland- British consul receiving Avery
- Wilf Taylor - agent sent to pick up film canister from Lansen. Run over when walking back to his hotel.
- Joani Taylor - Taylor's wife
- Bruce Woodford - an agent working for Leclerc
- Mrs Yates - Avery's neighbour, watches the street

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## Anna says

As always, le Carre's writing is elegant, fluid, and measured, however I did not particularly enjoy this novel. Although George Smiley's presence hovers over the narrative, he rarely manifests himself. For the most part, the reader follows the exploits of the Department men, whose glory days ended with the Second World War. Twenty years later, they have been sidelined by the Circus and jump at the chance to introduce an agent into East Germany. The narrative follows the genesis of this mission and the agent's training in detail, giving the

reader plenty of time to work up a profound sense of dread. For it is clear from the outset that the Department are hopelessly incompetent, out of date, and generally doomed. Their awkward pride and camaraderie are near-painful to witness. The reader is in much the position of Smiley and Control, who watch the proceedings with a distant sense of pity. That said, the reader is in no position to intervene or clear up the resulting mess, as the Circus is.

It's interesting to compare 'The Looking Glass War' to other George Smiley novels. In *Call for the Dead* and *A Murder of Quality*, the narrative follows Smiley around and takes on his sardonic, deadpan humour. By contrast, *The Spy Who Came In from the Cold* is not at all humorous and takes a bitter, cynical tone. Yet it is most definitely a spy thriller, in which the reader is gripped by suspense as the machinations of espionage unfold. *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy* creates a similarly tense atmosphere, tempered by Smiley's point of view. 'The Looking Glass War' is not a thriller, as it is obvious where events are heading and only the deluded men of the Department seem unaware. There is no real suspense about it, only a tragic inevitability, and very little humour.

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### **Brad Lyerla says**

I am reading le Carre's Smiley books in order. I finished *THE LOOKING GLASS WAR* yesterday. It is brilliant. My plan, and I reserve the right to change it, is to read all of the books and review them as a group when I have finished.

As for *LOOKING GLASS*, it came as a surprise. It is a comedy. A blistering and dark send up of the incompetence and dysfunction within the British military intelligence community which, in the 1960s, was dominated by aging and obsolete hold-overs from WWII. le Carre had me laughing out loud more than once as these sorry bumbler prepared a mission into East Germany to see if the Russians were building a nuclear missile base ala' what had happened in Castro's Cuba a few years before.

Of course, the humor does not last and the ending of *LOOKING GLASS*, as it inevitably must, is quite tragic. Call the book a tragi-comedy, I suppose. But I will maintain my position that *LOOKING GLASS* is greatly under-rated. It might even be better than *SPY WHO CAME IN FROM THE COLD*. le Carre himself thought it more realistic than *SPY*.

For now, I have to say again that le Carre's prose is special. Here is one of his sentences that caught my eye: "The whole house gently asserted an air of old age; it had a quality, like incense, of courteous but inconsolable sadness."

To write like that . . .

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### **Bill Kerwin says**

*The Spy Who Came in from the Cold* was praised for its harsh realism, but le Carre believed it was not harsh or realistic enough. On the contrary, he considered it unrealistic and romantic, what with its nearly omniscient intelligence agency, the agency's extraordinarily complex yet flawless plan, and the novel's

melodramatic conclusion: the death of star-crossed lovers at the foot of the Berlin Wall.

For this next book, le Carre chose to abstain from grand dramatic gestures and instead describe the intelligence service as he had experienced it in the '50's, filled with aging English Public School types hampered by nostalgia for the days of The War and Merrie Old England, holding a prejudiced view of everything not "British," and harboring the self-delusion that after countless compromises and betrayals they still possessed honor and commanded respect.

The photographic evidence of a missile placement in East Germany leads the foreign branch of military intelligence ("The Blackfriars Boys"), a ghost of its wartime self now reduced to gathering remote intelligence and conducting research, to once again--like in the good old days of The War—actually "put a man in," that is, place a live agent on the ground for reconnaissance.

Thirty-four year old Avery, the only man in the whole operation who seems to be under fifty, is put in charge of re-training and handling Leiser, a Pole in his forties, who worked with the agency in the war and is now an British citizen and London auto-mechanic. We observe the training operation in detail, and those details reveal the snobbery, antique attitudes, and general incompetence of an agency still convinced it can do great things, in spite of the fact that it is poorly funded and on the losing end of almost every inter-agency squabble. Then Leiser is "put in" on the East German side, and the reader follows his movements, absorbed, to the suspenseful and dismaying conclusion.

This is a very good book, filled with devastating portraits and cutting irony. I thought, however, that Avery got just a little too preachy at the end. What he says is apt, and, since he is the youngest, most idealistic and least deluded of the bunch, he is certainly the right man to say it. But such preaching is unnecessary, since Carre's portraits and ironies have already done their work.

Not as powerful as *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold*, but in its own way even more disturbing and devastating.

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## **John says**

*...he was witnessing an insane relay race in which each contestant ran faster and longer than the last, arriving nowhere but at his own destruction.*

For some reason I keep thinking of le Carre as a writer of thrillers, and it's true that his recent crop of novels definitely follow a kind of thriller model, but his earlier novels, like *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold* and *A Perfect Spy*, are really high tragedies that use some of the reversals of the conventional spy thriller to ease the delivery of the hefty dose of cynicism and dysfunction that fill his characters and the institutions at the heart of his stories. They're excellent portraits of the slow drift towards insanity that the Cold War set off, and they also come across as pretty thorough condemnations of the more secretive machineries that waged that war.

*The Looking Glass War* is probably the least thriller-y and most high tragedy of the le Carre I've yet read. Like in classical Greek drama where the tragic hero commits an act of hubris and is brought low by the gods, in the *Looking Glass War* it is a secretive British military intelligence agency that commits an act of bureaucratic overreach culminating in the recruiting and training of a secret agent to send into East Germany to gather information on a potential missile site.

Le Carre seeds the story from the very beginning with very subtle hints that the people running this agency are over their heads--the big deal the characters make out of being able to charge expenses, for instance, and their excitement at being able arrange a car service from the ministry, their inferiority complex towards their more functional sister intelligence agency, nicknamed the Circus. By the time we get to training the agent--the unfortunate, hapless Leiser--alarm bells are ringing in the reader's head as Leiser fumbles through one training exercise after another, never learning how to work the wireless set, for instance, all the while the head of this intelligence agency look on seeing only a return to their WWII-era operational glories.

It's a bit cringe-inducing to read when you realize that this will not end well (and it's not a spoiler to reveal this, since, as I say above, the author telegraphs this pretty early on), but it is still thrilling, with an ending that takes a bit of the wind out of you.

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## **Agnieszka says**

*Do you know what love is? I'll tell you: it is whatever you can still betray.*

If there is something like a literary model of a spy most of us would probably indicate on James Bond. Fast cars, beautiful women, shootings and all that false glamour. And after hard working day - martini shaken not stirred or conversely. Obviously. But not in LeCarre's world.

Disillusioned, tired and cynical men in the world where goal is indistinct, praise doubtful, morality ambiguous and victory deceptive. This is a spy's reality and *The looking glass war* fits into that trend of realistic spy novel perfectly.

John le Carré is depicting a hopeless, grey world; reality in which man is just a pawn in the other's game and the declarations and agreements are easily broken. There is no place for naïve idealists. *The looking glass war* is devoid of unexpected twists and turns, daring chases, thrilling fight scenes. The plot is focused on rivalry between two intelligence units and planned action in South Germany. Playing hare and hounds and searching for suit candidate to a dangerous task are in the centre of the book; and almost from the start you feel it is not going to end well.

This is a study of a morbid ambition and envy, ignoble betrayal and mediocrity in the intelligence community. But, most of all this it is a story about loneliness of a spy. In the name of what? LeCarre seems to ask. Novel is bleakly dark and depressing, an atmosphere claustrophobic, additionally enhanced by picture of ugly surroundings and gloomy weather.

And after reading you need something much stronger than martini to soothe that overwhelming feeling of despair and anger.

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## **Feliks says**

If John Le Carre had wished to write romance novels for his career; he would have written the best of his era. If he had wished to write swashbucklers, he would have written the best of his era. If he had wished to write

adventure tales, etc etc etc. My point is: he is that kind of writer. Happily, he started his career in public service--intelligence--and Fortuitously for the world's readers, he pursued a career writing an ensuing legacy of espionage novels. And those are the best of his era.

But this hardly describes his talent. It describes his accomplishment but not the richness, the tone, the tenor. "The Looking Glass War" demonstrates what his aim was: human relationships. Le Carre first and foremost wrote smashing damn good works of human psychology. These books of his ...vibrate with our common condition. They're much more about "people" than they are about "spies". They bulge with the unsung in life; the hidden 'stuff' going on in all our skulls; they seep with awkward conversations, lost reconciliations, and people trying to regain familiarity with each other.

Can you imagine--writing during a period when the world was gaga for James Bond and exploding industrial bases--John Le Carre setting himself down to pen these soft-spoken, resonant, feeling, psyche-driven studies and getting them published? Offering the world these weak, clumsy, fumbling bureaucrats and ex-soldiers and lackeys; toads; flunkies; departmental figureheads and cowards; and calling them spies? He turned the genre on its head and every novel like this one gave the head another spin.

He wrote wonderfully realistic fiction; character-based literature. "Looking Glass War" is one of the sturdiest; one of the least well-known; one of the most unforgettable, one of the most tugging-at-your-sternum. Even, years later. Its hard to forget clumsy Fred Leiser and 'the Department' trying to maintain themselves alongside the rise of MI5 and MI6. This is the kind of book Le Carre was capable of producing at any given year during his heyday. Marvelous and penetrating; part of the George Smiley legend; part of an overall arc of great writing in our time. Read it.

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## Nigeyb says

Compared with its predecessor 'The Spy Who Came In from the Cold', 'The Looking Glass War' (George Smiley #4) was a relative flop, especially in Britain. In John le Carré's introduction, written in 1991, he addresses this...

*After the success of 'The Spy Who Came In from the Cold' I felt I had earned the right to experiment with the more fragile possibilities of the spy story than those I had explored till now. For the truth was, that the realities of spying as I had known them on the ground had been far removed from the fiendishly clever conspiracy that had entrapped my hero and heroine in The Spy. I was eager to find a way of illustrating the muddle and futility that were so much closer to life. Indeed, I felt I had to: for while 'The Spy Who Came In from the Cold' had been heralded as the book that ripped the mask off the spy business, my private view was that it had glamourised the spy business to Kingdom Come.*

*So this time, I thought, I'll tell it the hard way. This time, cost what it will, I'll describe a Secret Service that is really not very good at all; that is eking out its wartime glory; that is feeding itself on Little England fantasies; is isolated, directionless, over-protected and destined ultimately to destroy itself.*

With my expectations suitably managed, and having loved the previous three Smiley novels, I conclude this is another excellent John le Carré novel. As in 'The Spy Who Came In from the Cold', George Smiley only has a bit part in this book, however his perceptiveness and awareness help the reader to understand what is happening.

In essence, 'The Looking Glass War' is a tale of haplessness: "The Department" is a small, increasingly irrelevant legacy of WW2, populated by deluded staff, which makes the novel painful to read. Avery, the only young person, cuts a particularly tragic figure. Amateurism, tragedy and stupidity permeate the entire novel. John le Carré lays bare snobbery, vanity, a sense of denial and delusion, repressed emotions, faded dreams, and incompetence. It's palpable, and often hard to read, but remains grimly compelling throughout. It's exactly what he set out to write: a more truthful novel that captured the internal politics, the little Englander mentality, and the complacency of the mid-60s UK intelligence service.

4/5

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### **Dr.Srinivas Prasad Veeraraghavan says**

While the "Smiley" trilogy is rightly feted as one of the greatest Fiction trilogies of the 20th Century, this Novel is my personal favourite of Le Carre's formidable and rather intimidating catalogue.

Strictly meant for lovers of serious Fiction, this is easily the bleakest book that I have ever read in my life. I remember taking a shower at midnight after I was done with it to "cleanse" myself. A hard, bitter, relentlessly cynical and disturbingly realistic peek at the sordid workings of an Espionage network.

Le Carre begins in his customary languid style, setting the tone and mood before the plot begins to tighten almost imperceptibly; culminating in a claustrophobic and an almost schizophrenic climax that leaves you numb, stunned and pondering over the astonishing capacity of the human mind to weave webs around itself.

A small piece of seemingly important information comes into the hands of "The Department", an almost defunct Brit Espionage network that is gasping for breath and hanging on by the skin of its teeth. The "Circus" (Le Carre buffs will be familiar with the term) starts to flex its muscles and what ensues is a painstakingly precise Espionage procedural and an intense struggle for establishing individual identity which will inevitably be brushed aside with ruthless efficiency keeping the "larger interests" in mind.

Le Carre admitted that this was his most realistic, nihilistic and hard hitting book and suggested that the stiflingly bleak tone may have been too much for even most hardened readers. He was damn right !

Do not pay heed to the average ratings here and follow the herd. With all due respect, they don't count for cow crap IMO.

Likely to be enjoyed and savoured by discerning, mature readers who can separate the wheat from the chaff.

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## **Kev Bartlett says**

The Looking Glass War was published shortly after perhaps Le Carre's most famous work The Spy Who Came In from the Cold and is every bit as murky, grim and depressing as the aforementioned (possibly even more so).

The book starts brilliantly in a Finish airport where a British agent (Taylor) anticipates the arrival of a pilot who, having undertaken a risky flyover, should have some vital information in his possession. From the moment the uneasy dialogue with the airport barman begins you know this agent's fate hangs in balance. And so sets forth a chain of events that culminates with four over-the-hill civil servants huddled together in a North German farmhouse hoping to recapture their WW2 glory days.

No characters come out well in this tale. Using one as an example: Avery, Leclerc's personal assistant, is a hopelessly naive fish out of water and is left aghast when he's tasked with returning to Finland to piece together Taylor's demise. His section reads almost like a horror film when he's holed up in the airport hotel jumping out of his skin over the smallest of knocks at the door. Spare a thought though for poor, poor Leiser; our main character in the second act. The moment the department tracks down the Anglicized Pole, who once was a British agent in WW2, for a risky cross border operation into East Germany you know he's doomed. Like the department itself he jumps at the chance to recreate his war hero image even if it's only shared by the misfits in British intelligence. Quite how Leiser trusts and adores the monstrously aloof Haldane so much is particularly puzzling to me. But there comes the crux of the matter. The elite have found their willing pleb to do their grubby work for them and if he fails so what? Who will miss a Pole working in a petrol station?

Its scenarios like these that can make Le Carre particularly hard going at times; which is why he has to often rely on his most renowned creation George Smiley who seems to be the only character that possesses a moral compass.

The Looking Glass War is undoubtedly one of Le Carre's finest amongst his illustrious array of works. Highly recommended.

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## **Cphe says**

For me a difficult book to rate, on one hand I enjoyed it although I came to have a marked contempt for some of the major characters. I felt the novel was a study in human nature and trying to hold on to the glory of past exploits. A clandestine world made up of an old boys club who are happy to throw the lamb to the wolves .....all in the name of glory, I found this to be a bleak and quite dour story, not for the faint of heart.

Well written as you would expect but I thought that it was more character driven. These books are becoming an acquired taste.

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## **Helen says**

Phenomenal, absolutely phenomenal.

Le Carre at the height of his powers. *The Looking Glass War* begins twenty years after the end of World War II, telling the tale of an imagined rivalry between the shrunken, decayed remains of military intelligence, and Smiley's legendary Circus, the political wing of British Intelligence.

The book begins with a botched operation; an agent dies. These men are no longer operational, they are playing at a game that has passed them by in terms of manpower, technology, technique and ability. Bathed in a sepia-toned fondness for the Good War, when ministries and armies awaited their decisions, they long to return to a time when they were vitally connected to the heart of something bigger. When a blurry, dubious lead falls into their laps, they eagerly blow it up into a full-scale spy operation, recruiting a long-retired agent who is laboring under the same sentiments as themselves; he too, longs to return to a time when he mattered.

The characters and situations are real and dimensional, sharply defined. You can almost hear them squabbling, you can almost see the bleak gray landscape. The politics are painfully amoral.

A mesmerizing read, as good in its way as *The Spy Who Came in From the Cold*. Highly recommended.

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## Jaline says

Have you ever wanted to be a spy? I didn't – not until I started reading **John Le Carré's George Smiley series** this year. I do remember when us four siblings played "spy" along with other games all over the acres of our farm and buildings, but I was a bit of a failure back then. I wanted to have everyone get along. I wanted to be the good guy who brought all the other 'fighters' (yes, I have an older brother) together in peace and harmony. So in the end, I became a double-spy. Great. My brothers were annoyed and my sister couldn't figure me out. Ha!

Well, Linda Hunt look out – there's a new Spy-Guy (um . . . make that Spy-Gal) in town!

I have enjoyed being an armchair spy reading this series and in this 4th book, there are conflicts arising between two factions of the spy game in London. One faction is supposed to be working the political end and one faction is supposed to be working the military end. But what does one do when these two areas start to overlap? Who gets to be the hero and save the day? And how?

Sometimes sideways psychology works. You go to the overall head of both departments who has a habit of saying no to everything. You plead like crazy for your Plan C as if it is Plan A – and he says no, then asks for an alternative. So, you casually toss off your Plan A as if it is of no consequence, and he adopts it like it was his idea in the first place.

That is roughly how this intriguing spy story begins. And George Smiley? Although he will never win any beauty contests, he has a mind like a steel trap – and he can make things happen in his quiet, unassuming way. For the most part, though, his role seems to be mopping up the messes after the fact.

Maybe I don't really want to be a spy after all – but it is interesting and informative to read John Carré's stories anyway.

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## **Srinivas Veeraraghavan says**

While the "Smiley" trilogy is rightly feted as one of the greatest Fiction trilogies of the 20th Century, this Novel is my personal favourite of Le Carre's formidable and rather intimidating catalogue.

Strictly meant for lovers of serious Fiction, this is easily the bleakest book that I have ever read in my life. I remember taking a shower at midnight after I was done with it to "cleanse" myself. A hard, bitter, relentlessly cynical and disturbingly realistic peek at the sordid workings of an Espionage network.

Le Carre begins in his customary languid style, setting the tone and mood before the plot begins to tighten almost imperceptibly; culminating in a claustrophobic and an almost schizophrenic climax that leaves you numb, stunned and pondering over the astonishing capacity of the human mind to weave webs around itself.

A small piece of seemingly important information comes into the hands of "The Department", an almost defunct Brit Espionage network that is gasping for breath and hanging on by the skin of its teeth. The "Circus" (Le Carre buffs will be familiar with the term) starts to flex its muscles and what ensues is a painstakingly precise Espionage procedural and an intense struggle for establishing individual identity which will inevitably be brushed aside with ruthless efficiency keeping the "larger interests" in mind.

Le Carre admitted that this was his most realistic, nihilistic and hard hitting book and suggested that the stiflingly bleak tone may have been too much for even most hardened readers. He was damn right !

Do not pay heed to the average ratings here and follow the herd. They don't count for cow crap !

Likely to be enjoyed and savoured by discerning, mature readers who can separate the wheat from the chaff.

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