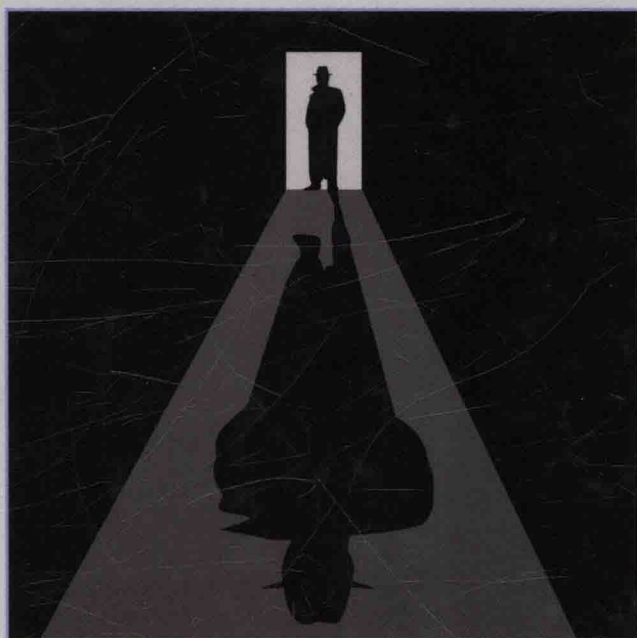


**ESPIONAGE IN  
BRITISH FICTION AND  
FILM SINCE 1900**

*The Changing Enemy*



**OLIVER S. BUCKTON**

## POPULAR CULTURE • BRITISH ESPIONAGE

"This fascinating study ranges over a century of British literary history to explain the persistent appeal of espionage fiction. Far more than just entertainment, Buckton argues, the spy novel has been a crucial register of geopolitical conflict, imperialist desire, and the tension between perceived threats and democratic values."

—TIMOTHY MELLEY, *Miami University*

"One can read through Oliver Buckton's book about British espionage in novels and films with genuine relish. He surveys the field from its origins in Kipling and others from the turn of the century to the present, suggesting that the genre itself represents a nimble response to shifting anxieties and paranoias in the audience that consumes them. His lively writing makes *Espionage in British Fiction and Film since 1900: The Changing Enemy* an engaging book that deserves a wide audience. Highly recommended."

—JAY PARINI, *Middlebury College*

*Espionage in British Fiction and Film Since 1900* traces the history and development of the British spy story from its emergence in the early twentieth century, through its growth as a popular genre during the Cold War, to its resurgence in the early twenty-first century. Using an innovative structure, the chapters focus on specific categories of fictional spying (such as the accidental spy or the professional) and identify each type with a vital period in the evolution of the genre. A central section of the book considers how, with the creation of James Bond by Ian Fleming in the 1950s, the professional spy was launched on a new career of global popularity, enhanced by the Bond film franchise.

In the realm of contemporary fiction, a glance at the bestseller list will reveal novelists such as John le Carré, Frederick Forsyth, Charles Cumming, Stella Rimington, Michael Chabon, Michael Crichton, and Michael Ondaatje—to name but a few—and illustrates the continued vitality of the spy novel into the twenty-first century, decades after the end of the Cold War. There is also a burgeoning critical interest in spy fiction, with a number of new studies appearing in recent years. A genre that many believed would falter and disappear after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet empire has shown, if anything, increased signs of vitality.

While exploring the origins of the British spy story, tracing it through cultural and historical events, *Espionage in British Fiction and Film Since 1900* also keeps in focus the essential role of the "changing enemy" in the evolution of spy fiction and cinema. The book concludes by analyzing examples of the enduring popularity of the British spy novel and film in the decades since the end of the Cold War.

**OLIVER S. BUCKTON** is professor of English at Florida Atlantic University.



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## The Changing Enemy

Oliver S. Buckton

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# **Espionage in British Fiction and Film since 1900**



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# Introduction

Spies are everywhere in contemporary culture: controversy over the reliability of intelligence about biological and nuclear weapons programs in Syria and Iran; recent leaks of classified information about the extent of NSA surveillance of American citizens; and related public anxieties in Britain about GCHQ's involvement in this program; intelligence operations against ISIS and the Russian buildup of troops on the border with Ukraine, all attest to the continuing topicality and relevance of espionage in our lives today. In the realm of fiction, a glance at the fiction bestseller list will reveal the continuing appeal of novelists such as John le Carré, Frederick Forsyth, Charles Cumming, Stella Rimington, Daniel Silva, Alex Berenson, Christopher Reich—to name but a few—and illustrates the continued fascination with the spy novel into the twenty-first century, decades after the end of the Cold War. There is also a burgeoning critical interest in spy fiction, with a number of significant new studies appearing in recent years. A genre that many believed would falter and disappear after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet Empire has shown, if anything, increased signs of vitality. Fifty years after the death of Ian Fleming, who created the most famous spy of all—007, James Bond—Bond novels continue to be authored by other writers, most recently William Boyd, and consumed by a wide readership. Even more so on the big screen, the longevity and global appeal of James Bond shows no signs of waning, with the recent *Skyfall* marking the half-century of the film franchise to widespread acclaim, and becoming the most successful film in the history of the franchise. And Bond is only the most famous of screen spies: the adventures of Jason Bourne of Bourne series and Ethan Hunt of *Mission Impossible* have also continued to thrill us. Clearly, then, the spy story shows no signs of losing its grip on the imaginations of readers and viewers.

Yet the spy story has deeper and more complex roots than most readers or viewers are aware of, and it has long served as a significant barometer of the political attitudes and, at times, contradictory cultural assumptions in Britain and, indeed, many other parts of the world. The purpose of this book is to explore the origins, history and development of the British spy novel and film into the twenty-first century, focusing on the various political, literary, and cultural influences that have shaped major landmarks of espionage literature and cinema. While the chief focus of the book is the spy literature and film produced by British authors and filmmakers, the influential productions of other nations and literatures are also considered, particularly where they relate closely to their British counterparts.

The spy novel emerged at a period of international crisis in early twentieth-century Europe, during the buildup to World War I, and has continued to reflect the shifting allegiances and conflicts of international relations. Its early pioneers, such as Rudyard Kipling, William Le Queux, Erskine Childers, and John Buchan, were deeply concerned with growing rivals such as Russia and Germany, and aware of the vulnerability of the British Empire—and indeed Britain itself—to invasion. A crucial aspect of the overall argument of this book is that spy fiction—a term I use to include both literature and film narratives—has consistently played a role in imagining, describing, elaborating, and indeed defining the identity of the “other”—the foremost “enemy” and national rival—that, in any given period, is perceived as the greatest threat to the national security of Britain and its allies. With this in mind, the study will assert that our political, “real life” understandings of conflicts between nations, ideologies, and populations are to some extent fictional—that is produced by discourses and fantasies within imaginative literature and film. There has always been a connection between imaginative fiction and historical and political fact in the spy novel, to the extent that the boundary between fact and fiction is not always easy to discern. More recently, the term “faction” has been used to denote this blend of truth and fiction in the spy novel. However, from the pioneering (and now largely forgotten) work of William Le Queux, it was not easy for readers to classify the narratives they read as simply fictional.

Indeed, the spy novel, from its origins in the late Victorian and Edwardian period, has exploited public anxiety and paranoia about threats of foreign invasion and international conspiracy, while frequently drawing on details of actual intelligence operations in order to achieve a sense of authenticity and contemporary realism. One significant consequence of up-to-the minute (or in some cases, ahead of the minute) realism of the spy novel is that it has been avidly consumed by those with responsibility for guiding the course of international affairs. President John F. Kennedy’s selection, at the height of the Cold War and shortly before the Cuban Missile crisis, of Ian Fleming’s *From Russia with Love* (FRWL) as one of his 10 favorite books is only the most

celebrated example of the influence of spy fiction on political affairs. More recently, former President Bill Clinton's praise of Daniel Silva shows that popular spy novelists continue to be read in the corridors of power. My argument reveals how the spy novel and film interweave sometimes far-fetched plots together with contemporary political realities to create compelling stories and dynamic protagonists, such that the reader cannot always discern what has been invented and what taken from the headlines.

The realism of the spy novel has also been bolstered by the fact that many of the successful practitioners of the genre have themselves served in the intelligence division. Whether using fiction to disguise the personal nature of the experiences recounted, or to avoid prosecution under the Official Secrets Act (OSA), former spies have frequently contributed to the expansion of spy fiction, from John Buchan, Graham Greene, Ian Fleming, John le Carré, to Stella Rimington. This professional background may provide a sense of authenticity to the narratives, though it cannot of course substitute for the ability to weave a thrilling tale. This book does not delve substantially into the biographical backgrounds of spies-turned-writers, but it does consider the fictionalizing of espionage experience as another important context for the blurring of actuality and fantasy in the spy novel.

As the subtitle of this book proclaims, a central concern is the way in which the definition and identity of the "enemy"—the (usually foreign, though sometimes domestic) threat in response to which the fictional spy, as much as the real one, is brought into being—has evolved and adapted since the early twentieth century. An important part of the spy story's ability to adapt to changing historical conditions while remaining current and compelling, is this power to reflect the prevailing anxieties and even obsessions about the threat from without (perhaps especially when that threat has already penetrated the host society). The argument tracks the major transitions from Russia (perceived as the greatest threat to the British Raj in India) to Germany under Kaiser Wilhelm and then the Nazis (prior to World War I and up to the end of World War II). If Britain's wars with Germany dominated fictional as well as military hostilities for the first half of the twentieth century, the Soviet Union and Eastern Bloc would displace the Nazis as the *bête noire* of spy fiction during the Cold War. Of course, there is no precise correlation between the alignments and enmities of international relations and the representation of the enemy in spy fiction. One intriguing effect of the imaginative power of the enemy in spy fiction is that, having been represented in sometimes monstrous detail, the imaginative enemies do not go away. A classic case is the Nazi villain who has remained a staple of the spy novel long after the end of World War II.<sup>1</sup>

In the period following the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Cold War—an era that I examine in my final chapter—the enemy as imagined by

spy novelists and filmmakers has again mutated, no longer being identified with a specific nation-state or geographical “center,” but as cells of international terrorists, in particular al-Qaeda and other organizations of Islamic extremist terrorism. Following the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001, the international hunt for Osama bin Laden (until his death in May 2011) has preoccupied novelists as well as Western political and military leaders. Not only did bin Laden, prior to his assassination, appear as a character in spy fictions (such as Alex Berenson’s *The Faithful Spy*) but the spy novel constructed elaborate plots to anticipate and thwart new plans of terrorist action. In some cases, the complexities of the “War on Terror” have prompted expressions of nostalgia for the Cold War with its more clearly defined enemy. Throughout these seismic shifts in geopolitical landscapes and allegiances since 1900, however, this book identifies recurring patterns of narrative, types of hero, and archetypes of villains, that have remained consistent in spy fiction throughout the changing historical eras.

With this in mind, this book has a strong historical argument, asserting that the developments in the spy novel and film have shadowed changes and expansions of intelligence operations since the beginning of the twentieth century. The book is divided into three sections, the first covering the early years of spy fiction up until the end of World War II; the second covering the Cold War period, from 1945–1990; and the third tracing the reanimation of the spy story following the end of the Cold War, defying predictions of its demise. Individual chapters, while linked to historical periods, explore the specific types of fictional spy that came into prominence during a specific period and shaped the atmosphere and texture of the spy novel of each generation. However, the chapters are not rigidly limited to this specific historical period, but may look back to antecedents and foreshadow future developments in the genre.

In the first chapter, I outline my argument concerning the shifting definitions of the enemy in spy fiction, and explore some of the political and ideological purposes served by these narrative strategies. In chapter 2, I explore the category of the “accidental spy,” which mirrors the origins of the spy novel in Victorian adventure fiction. Like the gentlemen-amateur explorers of Rider Haggard and R.L. Stevenson, the early spy protagonists have no special training or preparation for their espionage, and stumble upon international intrigue by accident. However, these protagonists are often lacking in purpose or direction at the beginning of the story, and willingly embrace the possibilities of adventure and patriotic service offered by the espionage plot. In some respects, the accidental spy is the most unencumbered type of protagonist for—while lacking the government support and technological resources of later professional spies—he or she is unaccountable to any official authority.<sup>2</sup>

Chapter 3, focusing on a category I term “the spy who knew too much,” explores a somewhat more specialized, but nonetheless influential, category of fictional spies that—while they are also generally amateurs—lack the innocence of the “accidental spy” and are marked in some way by a character flaw or moral stigma. Typified by the anti heroes of Eric Ambler and Graham Greene, this type of spy may be unwittingly involved in espionage, but he typically has a tainted past or possesses guilty knowledge that incriminate him. Rather than acting from a love of adventure or patriotism, the spy who knew too much is primarily concerned with his own survival. Chapter 4, “Licensing the Professional Spy,” gives center stage to the most famous fictional spy of the Cold War era, Ian Fleming’s James Bond. Bond is conspicuous by his absence from some recent studies of the spy novel, but he is an essential figure if we are to understand how the genre moved from the sidelines to the mainstream of popular culture. The risk of treating Bond as a special case is that we overlook the influences that shaped him; to avoid such misconceptions, the chapter includes significant discussion of earlier professional spies that helped shape the modern spy novel, such as Somerset Maugham’s *Ashenden*. Chapter 5, on the “Post-Bond Cold Warrior”, explores the reaction against Fleming (as well as the screen Bond) in spy novels and films from the 1960s, addressing the perceived lack of realism in Fleming’s novels and the films based (in some cases very loosely) on them. Authors such as John le Carré, Len Deighton, Frederick Forsyth, and Brian Freemantle, I argue, made their reputations as authors of “anti-Bond” spy novels, yet such writers benefited from the popular taste for spy fiction that Fleming and Bond had helped to create. This paradox, I argue, is apparent in an at times uneasy coexistence of conventions from the popular thriller alongside a more bleak, Conradian perception of moral ambiguity.

Chapter 6 explores a figure of increasing importance in postwar spy fiction: the double agent. In the aftermath of the British spy scandals of the 1950s and 60s—especially the “Cambridge Five” (Philby, Burgess, Maclean, Blunt, and Cairncross) and George Blake—the spy novel strove to absorb the devastating blows these scandals had administered to the British Secret Service organizations and, indeed, Britain’s international prestige as a leader in intelligence affairs. In particular, the figure of Kim Philby appears with uncanny frequency in the pages of postwar spy fiction, haunting the genre with intimations of betrayal and duplicity. Chapter 7 examines the role of the villain in spy fiction, distinguishing this figure from the double (or traitor within) and discussing how the more abstract “enemy” (a hostile nation-state or spy/terrorist organization) is condensed and embodied in a specific individual, often marked by a physical deformity or oddity as well as moral corruption. While some spy villains are based, with varying degrees of obviousness, on actual historical characters, this is an area where the spy novelist has used creative



license to forge memorable and disturbing malefactors without being subject to realist conventions.

Chapter 8 seeks to shed light on one of the most shadowy figures of spy literature; the spymaster, whose greatest assets are often anonymity and secrecy (registered in the fact that both real spymasters such as “C.” of SIS, and fictional ones such as “R” of *Ashenden* or “M” of the Bond novels, are identified by a single letter. The spymaster, though he can be traced back to the works of Buchan and Maugham, is predominantly a product of the professional intelligence bureau, with its hierarchies and interdepartmental rivalries. An essential function of the spymaster’s role is to justify the work of his or her department, and mediate between field agents and politicians. Despite being eclipsed by the spy hero in terms of visibility, action, and glamor, the spymaster is a key figure in the representation of espionage in fiction. S/he may be considered the puppeteer who holds the strings to the hero, has power of life and death over the individual agent, and authorizes his or her missions. Equally, the spymaster is the embodiment of the official, bureaucratic background of espionage, in this regard telling us a great deal about the values, intentions, and limitations of spy agencies.

The final chapter is devoted to the changes in direction that have occurred since the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet Empire. In an age where attacks on the enemy are made by remotely controlled drones, and much intelligence is gathered via surveillance of satellite communications, the individual human spy—and the HUMINT he or she provides—may seem in danger of becoming obsolete. However, in this chapter, while recognizing the profound changes that technologies have brought to the field of espionage, I argue that the human agent remains the focus of spy fiction, and that many of the techniques of tradecraft and characteristics of an earlier era remain in place despite the altered political and geographical environment.

The advantage of this book’s combined historical and thematic approach is that it allows the individual chapters to showcase the development of a particular type of fictional spy in the work of a number of different authors and filmmakers, tracing the evolution of these types in different contexts. At the same time, my book brings a significant historical dimension to the subject, as some of these types discussed flourished during specific eras. As this study traces the expanding professionalization of espionage and the influence this has on spy fiction, it is important to keep in mind the parallels between the work of espionage and the work of authorship. This goes beyond recognizing the profound impact that former spies have had on the development of spy fiction. It may be that novelists seemed to possess a particular skillset—including powers of observation, insight into character and motivation, communication and language skills, and even ability to fade into the background—that made them attractive as recruits to the Secret