Graham Greene's Thrillers and the 1930s

BRIAN DIEMERT

McGill-Queen's University Press
Montreal & Kingston • London • Buffalo

Graham Greene's Thrillers and the 1930s

BRIAN DIEMERT

McGill-Queen's University Press
Montreal & Kingston • London • Buffalo

ISBN 0-7735-1432-5 (cloth)
ISBN 0-7735-1433-3 (paper)

Legal deposit third quarter 1996
Bibliothèque nationale du Québec

Printed in Canada on acid-free paper

This book has been published with the help of grants from the Humanities and Social Science Federation of Canada, using funds provided by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, and Brescia College.

McGill-Queen's University Press is grateful to the Canada Council for support of its publishing program.

Canadian Cataloguing in Publication Data

Diemert, Brian, 1959–
Graham Greene's thrillers and the 1930s
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 0-7735-1432-5 (bound)
ISBN 0-7735-1433-3 (pbk.)
1. Greene, Graham, 1904–1991 – Criticism and interpretation.
2. Greene, Graham, 1904–1991 – Political and social views.
3. Political fiction, English – History and criticism. I. Title.
PR6013.R44Z6324 1996 823'.912 C96-900319-6

This book was typeset by Typo Litho Composition Inc.
in 10/12 Palatino.

Acknowledgments

Like any work that has been created over the course of years, this one could not have been written without the advice and support I received from a host of people who gave generously of their time and ideas. Most notably, I wish to thank Allan Gedalof and Michael Groden at the University of Western Ontario for their careful reading of the manuscript and many helpful criticisms. I am also grateful to Judith Adamson, whose commentary on the manuscript and knowledge of Greene and his work led me to clarify much of my thinking about Greene's politics in the 1930s and so made this a better book. I owe a debt of gratitude as well to Tom Carmichael, Alison Lee, and Carole Farber for their many valuable comments.

It is not possible to name all of those whose insights, encouragement, and friendship assisted me in the development of this book, but I particularly want to thank D.M.R. Bentley, Jim Snyder, Tracy Ware, Richard Costello, and Sr Corona Sharp of Brescia College. I must also thank Kim Morningstar, who ably assisted me in preparing a legible typescript by word-processing what were often nearly illegible handwritten revisions. During the early stages of my work on Greene, I was fortunate to have the support of a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council fellowship. This book has been published with the help of grants from the Social Science Federation of Canada and from Brescia College. Lastly, my greatest debts are owed to my parents, Marvin and Barbara Diemert, and to my wife, Dr Monika Lee, whose love, encouragement, and patience made this book possible. She is my best critic and a constant source of inspiration. This book is for her and our daughter, Anna.

Portions of my commentary on *It's a Battlefield* have already appeared in *PLL: Papers on Language and Literature*, vol. 30, no. 3 (summer 1994) and are reprinted by permission of the publisher, the board of trustees of Southern Illinois University at Edwardsville. My comments on *Brighton Rock* have previously appeared, again in altered form, in *Twentieth Century Literature*, vol. 38, no. 4 (winter 1992).

Abbreviations

BR	*Brighton Rock*
CA	*The Confidential Agent*
CE	*Collected Essays*
EMM	*England Made Me*
GS	*A Gun for Sale*
IB	*It's a Battlefield*
JWM	*Journey Without Maps*
LR	*The Lawless Roads*
MF	*The Ministry of Fear*
PD	*The Pleasure Dome*
SL	*A Sort of Life*
ST	*Stamboul Train*
WE	*Ways of Escape*

Contents

Acknowledgments vii

Abbreviations ix

1 Graham Greene and the 1930s 3

2 Exploring the Popular in Two Early Novels: *Stamboul Train* and *England Made Me* 47

3 Aspects of Detective Fiction 62

4 Approaches to the Thriller in Greene's Early Work: *Rumour at Nightfall* and *It's a Battlefield* 98

5 Thrillers of the 1930s: *A Gun for Sale, Brighton Rock,* and *The Confidential Agent* 116

6 *The Ministry of Fear* 151

7 The End of This Affair: Summing Up 179

Notes 183

Bibliography 211

Index 231

1 Graham Greene and the 1930s

Prompted by the publication of *The End of the Affair*, *Time* magazine claimed in a 1951 cover story that Graham Greene's stories are "as gripping as a good movie ... The people who have made Graham Greene the popular success he is today are, by and large, people who like the movies – people who go for a 'good thriller' ... he is now seriously discussed as possibly 'the finest writer of his generation.' No other writer in England enjoys Greene's combination of popular and critical success" ("Shocker" 62).

In many ways, these remarks epitomize the critical consensus on Greene's work over the past forty years, for, until his death on 3 April 1991, Graham Greene was routinely referred to as "our greatest living novelist" and praised for his ability to weld popularity to critical acceptance. Indeed, as Roger Sharrock remarks, "Greene's great technical achievement has been the elevation of the form of the thriller into a medium for serious fiction" (12). The story of how and why Greene's fiction developed in this way is the subject of this book.

To call any author "our greatest novelist" or, as Sharrock does, "our most distinguished novelist" (12), however glowing the praise, ultimately raises questions about the ground upon which such epithets stand. Certainly there is no denying Greene's continuing popularity, as is clear from the fact that all but two of his forty or so books remain in print and available in paperback editions.[1] Equally certain is that his popularity stems in part at least from his ability to write exciting, suspenseful stories – many of which have been filmed – that continue to entertain a broad spectrum of readers.

Many literary critics, however, view popularity with suspicion and seldom see it as the mark of a writer's literary worth. Greene, himself, aware of this attitude, none the less was able to mock it in *The End of the Affair* when the novelist Bendrix anticipates the critic's assessment of his own work: "Patronizingly in the end he would place me – probably a little above Maugham because Maugham is popular and I have not yet committed that crime – not yet, but although I retain a little of the exclusiveness of unsuccess, the little reviews, like wise detectives, can scent it on its way" (148). Greene's popularity, as David Lodge observes, has often been seen as reason to doubt the quality of his work ("Graham" 2). Indeed, a strong critical bias within the academy has in the past separated popular culture from high culture and so condemned popular works and popular forms or subgenres such as science fiction, crime fiction, the western, and historical romance novels.[2] At its most extreme, as in the cases of F.R. Leavis, Q.D. Leavis, and José Ortega y Gasset, this bias has seen popularity and artistic quality as mutually exclusive. More recently, owing to the work of critics such as Leslie Fiedler, Northrop Frye, Dennis Porter, William Stowe, Janice Radway, and Catherine Belsey and to structuralist and post-structuralist theorists such as Umberto Eco, Tzvetan Todorov, Roland Barthes, and Jacques Derrida, and, of course, to authors such as Greene, the bias against the serious analysis of popular forms and popular texts is openly questioned, particularly when the issue of canon formation is discussed by Marxist, feminist, minority, and interdisciplinary commentators. In many respects, the whole idea of a "great tradition" of English literature (which is to be read, studied, and taught) has crumbled as troubling assumptions behind the canonization of literary texts are increasingly exposed; as Terry Eagleton remarks, "The unquestioned 'great tradition' of the 'national literature' has to be recognized as a *construct*, fashioned by particular people for particular reasons at a certain time. There is no such thing as a literary work or tradition which is valuable *in itself*" (*Literary Theory* 11). Yet, the question of literary value has not disappeared either from critical debate or from the reading public's imagination. As an issue of *Esquire* magazine demonstrated some few years ago (July 1989), publishers continue to employ a critical apparatus that maintains a hierarchy of authors and texts in bookstores and in those periodicals, magazines, and newspapers from which the majority of readers get their literary news.

Because he has received both acclaim and scorn for his use of the thriller format in many of his texts,[3] the reaction to Greene's work exposes a host of biases – against popular fiction, against genre fiction, and against realistic fiction – to which critics are now opening their

eyes. What renders this issue even more complex is that, although Greene is undoubtedly a popular writer, the same media that most strongly preserve the hierarchical distinctions between "serious" literature and "popular" literature also hailed Greene before his death as the "best living novelist" writing in English.[4]

To study Greene's fiction in light of his use of the popular form of the thriller, then, is to explore indirectly, through an examination of the strategies for reading that Greene develops in his texts, the twin concepts of canon formation and critical authority, of privileging certain types of literary texts – for whatever reasons – over others, and also to consider one kind of response after 1930 to the innovations of the high modernists in the previous decade. In this regard, the whole question of Greene's attraction to the thriller as a form and the subsequent distinction between "entertainment" and "novel" that he applied to his work prior to 1969 must be brought into focus.[5] As well, the structure of the thriller, and its relation to the detective-fiction formula, needs to be viewed as a metaphor for the activity of reading because intelligent reading is now, as it was in the 1930s, the first line of intellectual self-defence that citizens can adopt in order to ensure the development and maintenance of a free society.

This chapter focuses particularly on the first and most prolific phase of Greene's career, the years from 1929 to 1943. It begins by portraying Greene's use of the thriller as part of a widespread response to the literature and criticism of high modernism, which emerged during and after the First World War, and to the political, socio-economic, and military crises of the 1930s. Donat O'Donnell made the point well when he wrote in 1947 that "far more than the left-wing militancy of such poets as Auden and Spender ... the thrillers of Mr. Greene reflect the state of the West European mind in the 'thirties," and that, as a result, Greene is "the most truly characteristic writer of the 'thirties in England, and the leading novelist of that time and place" (25, 28). After briefly discussing the "entertainment" label that Greene attached to his thrillers, the chapter examines the formation of Greene's attitudes to popular literature and art within the context of critical opinion in the 1930s. Crucial to its approach is a consideration of the place of detective fiction within Greene's aesthetic.

"ENTERTAINMENTS" AND "NOVELS"

In the 1970s Greene said that, between 1936 and 1969, he applied the label "entertainments" to those of his books that deliberately made use of the popular form of the thriller, the point of the term being to distinguish those writings from his "more serious work" (*WE* 78). *A*

Gun For Sale (1936) was the first to be labelled an "Entertainment," and five subsequent texts share this subheading: *The Confidential Agent* (1939), *The Ministry of Fear* (1943), *The Third Man* (1950), *Loser Takes All* (1956), and *Our Man in Havana* (1958). These books were "entertainments" because, as Greene told the *Paris Review* in 1953, "they [did] not carry a message" (Shuttleworth 32). But the issue of how Greene employed this designation calls for some comment when we consider other incidents of its use. *Stamboul Train* (1932), his fourth published novel, was not originally called an "entertainment" in its first editions but was given this heading after 1936, and critics now routinely group it with the six other entertainments. "The Basement Room" (1935) was also called an "entertainment" but only when it was reprinted as "The Fallen Idol" (after the title of the film version) and published, after 1950, by Heinemann and later Penguin with *The Third Man*.[6] Greene even considered *The Quiet American* (1955) an entertainment when he was working on it (Allain 148–9), and indeed it is a book that shares a great deal with the thrillers of the 1930s. *Brighton Rock* (1938) is a more difficult case because it was called an entertainment in its first American edition but not in its first British edition published a month later, and subsequent American reprintings removed the subheading.

This vacillation suggests that the issue of what constitutes an entertainment and Greene's use of the term is not as straightforward as it is sometimes made to appear. Despite the growing volume of critical commentary that Greene has inspired, much of it offers brief and dismissive treatments of those works he chose to call "entertainments." And, although Philip Stratford's *Faith and Fiction*, Judith Adamson's *The Dangerous Edge*, and Elliott Malamet's dissertation offer good discussions of all or some of these texts, only Peter Wolfe's 1972 study, *Graham Greene: The Entertainer*, treats them exclusively.[7] Recent studies by Henry Donaghy, Neil McEwen, and R.H. Miller, among others, continue to slight the "entertainments" with brief comment. On the other hand, as an anonymous reviewer has noted, Greene's "novels," particularly the so-called Catholic novels (*Brighton Rock* [1938], *The Power and the Glory* [1940], *The Heart of the Matter* [1948], *The End of the Affair* [1951], and *The Burnt-Out Case* [1961]) receive most of the critical attention for three main reasons: they offer easily isolated themes and a certain guaranteed seriousness; Catholic critics have been quick to offer Catholic explanations and interpretations; and Greene's distinction between "novels" and "entertainments" "encouraged critics to take his best work lightly" ("GG: Man Within" 11).

To be sure, Greene's selective use of the label "entertainment" implies a difference between two kinds of texts. What is more, critics

often see this difference as both generic and qualitative; that is, the "entertainments" are considered "pot-boilers" (Atkins 30) and "lighter" or "lesser" fare since they are more obvious in their attempts to reach a large audience through their explicit use of the thriller's conventions. By contrast, the novels are deemed "serious work" (Atkins 30) both in theme and in form. Hence, in the 1950s and 1960s it was fashionable to dismiss *A Gun For Sale* (1936), *The Confidential Agent* (1939), and *The Ministry of Fear* (1943) as "trial run[s]" (Lewis 240) for the more significant novels that followed each: *Brighton Rock*, *The Power and the Glory*, and *The Heart of the Matter*. For R.W.B. Lewis, these latter texts make up a "trilogy" exploring an explicitly religious theme.[8]

Attempts to downplay down the distinction between "novel" and "entertainment" also run into difficulties because the label continues to be seen as a mark of genuine difference. For instance, Robert O. Evans calls Greene's distinction "superficial" but follows a commonly held position that sees the "entertainment" label as a mark of the supposedly small degree to which these texts deal with the seriousness of life (Evans, "Introduction" vii)[9]; consequently, the entertainments are conceived of as less important, and Evans' selection of critical essays reflects this assumption. Similarly, John Atkins, Richard Kelly, David Pryce-Jones, and Martin Turnell all question the distinction, but each implicitly validates the practice of designating some texts entertainments and others novels by treating the label as a mark of genuine difference. This approach to Greene's work is widespread. Most readers, including those who admire the "entertainments" above the "novels" (such as W.W. Robson, Gavin Lambert, and, to an extent, David Lodge), have largely accepted the idea that Greene's texts are of two kinds, that Greene writes in two distinct genres.

One problem is that many commentators still accept the definition of the "entertainment" genre that was proposed in 1951 by Kenneth Allott and Miriam Farris in the first book-length study of Greene's fiction.[10] They suggested that the entertainments were distinguished from the novels by a comparative lack of character development, by the wilful use of an interesting background for its own sake, and by the free use of coincidence and improbabilities to link aspects of the plot (78–9). Others have added to this definition by claiming that the entertainments possess melodramatic story-lines (particularly in their use of violence) (Kunkel 157), rapidly paced action moving "in short, sharp, cinematographic flashes" which give the reader little time to weigh probabilities (Kunkel 105), and relatively happy endings (Sharrock 12, 72) or, at least, "solution[s] with resolution" in contrast to the novels' resolutions without solutions (R.H. Miller 10). On a more

thematic level, A.A. De Vitis argues that the novels express "the serious preoccupation with religious and ethical problems" while the "secular" entertainments subordinate these concerns to "plot, action, and melodrama" (27). For De Vitis and others, this emphasis ensures that the "entertainments are not the thought-provoking documents that the novels are," though "any writer of thrillers or light fiction would be proud to have written" them (53).

In one sense, De Vitis and others who share his view of the entertainments cannot be blamed for seeing them as less important work. As already noted, Greene himself seemed to express this opinion in a number of places, among them a 1955 radio interview in which he commented: "In one's entertainments one is primarily interested in having an exciting story as in physical action, with just enough character to give interest in the action ... In the novels I hope one is primarily interested in the character and the action takes a minor part" (cited in Pryce-Jones 62; Wolfe 32; and Silverstein 24). Yet, although it is always tempting and sometimes useful to do so, anyone who quotes Greene for support does so at his or her peril[11]: in a later interview with Anthony Burgess, Greene expressed his concern over the kind of thing that happens when critics separate his fiction into the serious novels – therefore, important work – and the not-so-serious entertainments (thrillers) – therefore, escapist or minor work: "The more I think of it, the more I worry about this division of literature into the great because hard to read, the not so great – or certainly ignoble by scholars – because of the desire to divert, be readable, keep it plain. You don't find Conan Doyle dealt with at length in the literary histories. Yet he was a great writer. He created several great characters – ... Something ought to be done about this double standard" (Burgess 22–3). Similarly, in an extended conversation with Marie-Françoise Allain, Greene noted that he originally employed the distinction to escape melodrama (by which he means "a measure of violence in the action" [Allain 37]), but that after *The Ministry of Fear* the "novels and entertainments resembled each other more and more" so that he "abandoned the dichotomy once and for all with *Travels With My Aunt*, for it served no further purpose" (Allain 148). Curiously, however, he had confessed earlier in the interview that he "only avoided melodrama in one or two books, *The End of the Affair* and *Travels With My Aunt*" (37), which suggests that if the "entertainments" were written to purge, through an imaginative process, "the temptation of melodrama" (Stratford, "GG" 67), they must have failed in their objective.

In considering the differences between "entertainments" and "novels," we face the difficulty of generic classification, and so ter-

minology itself becomes a problem because "genre" is often used in two distinct ways. On the one hand, it describes the broad classifications of form such as novel, short story, novella, play, poem, epic, lyric, and so on into which we place literary texts. On the other hand, "genre," in the sense of genre fiction for instance, describes particular types of narrative such as detective fiction, science fiction, or the western which can be found in any text regardless of its form as novel, film, play, or whatever. For critics of Greene's work, these differing uses raise potential difficulties since, with the two exceptions of "The Fallen Idol," a short story, and *Loser Takes All*, a novella, Greene's entertainments are also novels. The distinction between "entertainment" and "novel," however, is usually treated as a generic difference in the term genre's second sense; the "entertainment" is seen as a type of genre fiction and so is generally accorded less respect. (To avoid confusion, I use "genre" in the second sense of the term, although other critics might use terms such as type, mode, or subgenre to describe the distinction between "entertainment" and "novel.") But whether one treats "entertainment" as a modal or a generic term hardly matters since the second use of "genre" includes all other possible distinctions (type, kind, mode, form, subgenre) that might be applied in the classification of texts. In this way one can speak of thrillers, mysteries, detective stories, spy stories, police-procedural novels (to name five closely related forms) as distinct genres, although a more precise typology might describe them as subgenres of the novel or types of crime fiction – itself a variety of the mode of romance – or even as forms of the "entertainment."

The chief difficulty, despite Tzvetan Todorov's warning that genres are constantly being transformed (*Genres* 15), lies in seeing genre as a "natural" or prescriptive entity and in viewing Greene as working in distinct genres. On a general level, this presumption leads critics to make "entertainment" the marginalized term in the Greenian binary opposition of "entertainment"/"novel" (thus the entertainments are treated separately and/or differently from the novels). More specifically, however, such thinking has led to some remarkable charges against Greene which seem to miss the point of his work because critics assume that genres cannot be mixed.

For instance, one influential critic in this regard, R.W.B. Lewis,[12] thinks Greene guilty of generic confusion in his early novels, because they display "an apparent failure to distinguish between various fictional genres ... [and] the confusion of purpose and the blurry handling of the elements are rooted in a failure to disentangle the *mystery* of the mystery, to separate it out from the contingencies of melodrama and the staged surprises of the brain-twister" (239–40). For

Lewis, the early novels fail because they do not conform easily to standards of decorum for generic conventions: Greene, it seems, does not know how to write a proper thriller because he has mixed seriousness of purpose with the artificial constructions of the genre. The text that demonstrates this confusion most clearly for Lewis is *Brighton Rock*, which, although it effectively exploits the "confusion" of genres, still "betrays an initial confusion between what Greene calls an 'entertainment' and what he finally offered as tragedy" (239). André Maurois is similarly critical of *Brighton Rock* and does not rank it high among Greene's texts because he finds that the detective-story element in the novel (Ida Arnold's pursuit of Pinkie Brown) holds a disproportionate place in the story (Maurois 387). By way of contrast, David Lodge admires *Brighton Rock* precisely for its use of the crime story (Lodge/Gregor 165).

What Lewis and Maurois, among others, demonstrate is the power of expectations surrounding the concept of genre. In recognizing that genre signals control reader response, they rely on an understanding of genre similar to Frederic Jameson's formulation that "genres are essentially literary *institutions*, or social contracts between a writer and a specific public, whose function is to specify the proper use of a particular cultural artifact" (*Political Unconscious* 106). Here, the idea of genre as a contract suggests that reading is permitted by a kind of legitimate, legal, authority and that a particular text can be properly or improperly used, just as the book can be improperly shelved. A label such as "entertainment", however, raises questions about genre since it is a commentary superimposed on the text by the text, yet, as Jacques Derrida notes, it is not of the text ("Law of Genre" 61). For Derrida, "genre" (like "presence," "centre," "speech," and so on) is the privileged term in a structure of binary opposition (hence, presence/absence, centre/periphery, speech/writing, or, in Greene's terms, novel/entertainment) that marks the boundary of two conceptual fields by defining an edge. To do this, however, Derridian logic dictates that genre must contain within it "a principle of contamination, a law of impurity," which involves "a sort of participation without belonging – a taking part in without being a part of, without having membership in a set." Derrida calls this aspect of genre "the law of the law of genre" (55).

Evidence for the "law of the law of genre" is found in the individual trait that marks genre within a text. The mark that a set of texts shares distinguishes that group from other texts, but in itself the mark (or "re-mark" since it is repetition that renders a trait a mark of genre) evinces the contamination of a generic distinction. Hence, any text, whether a newspaper editorial or a novel, indicates by means of a