

An old man's anger: *Absolute Friends*, by John le Carré

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Absolute Friends, by John le Carré, 455 pages, Boston: Little, Brown, 2003

The latest novel by veteran British author John le Carré has had a generally frosty reception from critics on both sides of the Atlantic. The *Times Literary Supplement* (TLS) intimates that his new work is little more than *agit-prop* and headlines its review “le Carré’s agit propositions.” In particular, the TLS reviewer objects to le Carré’s treatment of contemporary American politics in *Absolute Friends*, declaring that the author’s indictment of the United States “overshoots reasonable levels of credibility.”

In the *New York Times*, reviewer Michiko Kakutani has no time for British understatement and is positively scathing in her dismissal of *Absolute Friends*, describing the book as “a clumsy, hectoring, conspiracy-minded message-novel meant to drive home the argument that American imperialism poses a grave danger to the new world order.”

Kakutani has trawled the dictionary to assemble derogatory epithets to describe the book which she states is, in turn, “ridiculously contrived,” “simplistic,” “ungainly and dogmatic,” and “preposterous.” For Geoffrey Wheatcroft, also writing in the *New York Times*, the matter is easier—le Carré is simply anti-American (see “Smiley’s (Anti-American) People,” January 11, 2004).

Le Carré has been entertaining his readers with intelligently told espionage stories for some 40 years. As an ex-spy himself—initially recruited at the age of 17—he writes with inside knowledge of espionage tradecraft and the relations and rivalries between secret services and government. *Absolute Friends* is his 19th novel, but none of them has received such an initially hostile reception as this latest. What has le Carré done that has so upset the critics of the *New York Times*, among others?

Without revealing the entire plot, it is necessary to deal briefly with the content of the novel. Its main figure is Ted Mundy, the only child of Major Mundy, a retired British army officer formerly stationed in India and a man with a skeleton in his closet. As a young man, Ted Mundy travels in the 1960s to Berlin and meets a German left-wing radical named Sasha—his Absolute Friend. Following the ebbing of the radical movement, Sasha goes east and is recruited as an agent by East German secret intelligence (Stasi), but also allows himself to be recruited by British intelligence. At a later point, Mundy is also recruited by Sasha and also operates as a double agent for both British and East German security services.

Mundy and Sasha are key figures in the concluding episode of the book, which involves a bloody provocation by right-wing American political forces and US intelligence agents aimed at discrediting left-wing intellectuals and opponents of US politics, in particular the American-led war against Iraq.

The first point to be made is that the blusterings of critics such as Kakutani and Wheatcroft are aimed at the relatively small proportion of le Carré’s book dealing directly with current American politics. For most of *Absolute Friends*, the author is in his familiar territory, sketching out the

molding of a British spy, first during the period of the Cold War, and then as Mundy is forced to find his feet in the unsure social and political climate following the collapse of the Soviet Union.

In most of his spy books, le Carré has concentrated on fleshing out the world of the post-war English spy. Drawing upon his own personal experience (from his own family and his espionage career), le Carré has repeatedly presented a compelling psychological profile of rootless elements in the English middle class (usually on the way down). A recurring figure in his books is the double agent, a person who is forced (or revels in the opportunity) to lead at least three lives—his everyday life for public consumption and the two different lives he must lead for his two spy masters. At the same time, a double agent is motivated by causes and ideologies, and in the course of the Cold War the choice was plain—either patriotism and the defence of Britain’s crumbling empire, or betrayal and collaboration with the Soviet enemy.

The collapse of the Stalinist Eastern bloc countries in the early 1990s put an end to the relative certainties of post-war politics and espionage. In his new book, le Carré increasingly enters new territory and devotes much of his text to dealing with European conditions and the factors that shaped his East European double agent—Sasha. One presumes from the book that le Carré has been paying increasing attention to post-war European history and the Soviet and East German Stalinist bureaucracy. In any event, in connection with his main character Mundy, the name of the Russian revolutionary Leon Trotsky crops up no less than three times (albeit in sleight-of-hand fashion).

Take the character of Sasha, for example. Mundy meets Sasha in the Kreuzburg suburb of Berlin in 1968. Sasha is a German radical absorbed with pseudo-revolutionary ideas and involved in direct action anarchist politics. It is soon made clear that Sasha has a personal motivation for his radicalism. Sasha’s own father was an active member of the National Socialists and fought for the Wehrmacht in the Second World War. Taken prisoner by the Russians and freed from internment in a Soviet camp after the war, Sasha’s father returned to Leipzig in East Germany. In 1960, the father crossed to West Germany with his family to take up work as a pastor and pillar of the conservative establishment. Sasha’s political radicalism is fuelled by both the Nazi past and the religious fervour of his estranged father—a “devotee of free market Christian capitalism”—whom he terms merely *Herr Pastor*. (In reality, a number of prominent members of the German anarchist Red Army Fraction had parents who were active as servants of the church.)

Frustrated by the failure of radical student activities in the 1960s, Sasha allows himself to be recruited as a spy for the East German Stalinist bureaucracy. In one of a number of dramatic twists in the book, Sasha learns, however, that his father had taken exactly the same path as himself. In the course of internment in Russia, his father had been won over to the Stalinist cause, and behind his orthodox conservative existence in post-war West Germany was in fact operating as an East German spy. In a further twist, the Stasi handler of Sasha declares that he had known the

latter's father for 40 years—implying that the Stasi officer also knew *Herr Pastor* from their period of joint membership in the National Socialists.

A former member of the German NSDAP who goes on to become a leading representative of the Stalinist GDR and its secret police—is this “preposterous” or “overshooting the bounds of credibility.” In fact, there are a number of cases of leading Nazis who were recruited to the cause of Stalinism following their capture and internment in the Soviet Union.

Ernst Grossman joined the NSDAP in 1938, and was active in the Nazi Freikorps and SS. After the war, he joined the Stalinist SED in East Germany and rose through the ranks to eventually become a member of its central committee. Professor Kurt Säuberling joined the NSDAP in 1930, and was active in the SS. After the war, he joined the SED and between 1954 and 1958 was a deputy to the East German parliament. As a fascist soldier, Säuberling was awarded the Medal of Valour first class. Under the East German Stalinists, he was recipient of the Hero of Labour medallion. While the East German Stalinist regime held a series of very public trials after the war to prosecute known fascists, the bureaucracy was also prepared to turn a blind eye to Nazis who could be helpful to its cause.

Le Carré's depiction of modern political relations in Britain in *Absolute Friends* is also perceptive. Mundy's wife in Great Britain, Kate, unaware of her husband's spying activities, is an aspiring parliamentary candidate for Tony Blair's New Labour Party. After years of marriage, Ted and Kate's relationship has reached a breaking point. With an acute sense of the importance of the role of good food in oiling bourgeois social and political relations, le Carré describes how Mundy and his wife thrash out their family problems over supper.

Between the starter (avocado and crab) and the main course (trout with almonds and green salad), Kate hypocritically throws her political principles to the wind and explains to Ted that, although as a New Labour member she should be opposed to private schooling, she absolutely has to make an exception with her own son, who is so obviously a special case. “In Jake's case only, Kate is *half* decided to waive her objections to private schools: Jake's turbulent nature is crying out for individual attention.”

Between the trout and dessert (apple crumble and custard), Ted and Kate then discuss on what basis they should divorce. “As a prospective parliamentary candidate she obviously cannot consider admitting to adultery.” “How about settling for irretrievable breakdown,” she proposes. Far from being “preposterous” or “contrived” in one scene after the other in *Absolute Friends*, le Carré demonstrates a perceptive grasp of contemporary political and personal relations.

In his previous novel, *The Constant Gardener*, le Carré demanded much of his readers when asking them to believe that a character such as the British career diplomat Justin Quayle would turn his back on his class and social position in order to valiantly and doggedly track down the people and organisations behind the murder of his wife. A similar problem arises in *Absolute Friends* when le Carré depicts ex-double agent Mundy as a man with sufficient moral backbone and stamina in the second half of his life to take up a fight against what he regards as the world's new most threatening enemy. Nevertheless, Mundy, like all of le Carré's characters, is a flawed personality with his own foibles and failings, and so his depiction never entirely exceeds the bounds of credibility. And Mundy is angry—in particular at the way in which the US and Britain began a war against Iraq.

“Suddenly he is mad as a hornet.... The lies and hypocrisies of politicians are nothing new to him. They never were. So why now? Why leap on his soapbox and rant uselessly about the same things that have been going on since the first politician on earth lisped his first hypocrisy, lied, wrapped himself in the flag, put on God's armour and said he never did it in the first place.

“It is the old man's impatience coming on early. It's anger at seeing the show come round again one too many times....

“It's the discovery in his sixth decade, that half a century after the death of empire, the dismally ill-managed country he done a little of this and that for is being marched off to quell the natives on the strength of a bunch of lies, in order to please a renegade hyperpower that thinks it can treat the rest of the world as its allotment.”

There is every reason to believe that in this passage it is the author himself and not just Mundy articulating his dismay and frustration at the utterly fraudulent warmongering of the US and Britain. In writing *Absolute Friends*, le Carré concedes that he was motivated by a “mixture of anger and impatience...and a growing despair.” He felt a responsibility to confront his readers “with things not easily confronted outside of fiction. A piece of political science fiction about what could happen if we allow present trends to continue.”

Critics such as Kakutani and Wheatcroft are obviously alarmed at Mundy/le Carré's reaction. They dismiss as contrived and “anti-American” his depiction of a violent provocation organised by American intelligence forces aimed at discrediting left-wing opponents of the war (which le Carré identifies as a group comprising prominent intellectuals, opponents of globalisation and dissident economists) and forcing European governments to intensify their support for the US war against terror.

For the *Times* critics, perhaps such a thesis is beyond the pale, but any sober analysis of the last years of the Bush government makes clear that such a scenario is not at all preposterous. Up until now there has still been no adequate explanation by the US government for the terror attack of September 11; and any investigation would have to adequately explain why terrorists under the continuous scrutiny of American intelligence services were able to carry out their deed. There is also substantial evidence to indicate that the Bush government is actively working to disrupt and delay the work of the only commission officially appointed to investigate the terror attacks.

For its part, the *New York Times* itself has been far from an objective observer of and commentator on these events, but has rather run columns putting forward its own deceitful arguments for war against Iraq. Indeed, there are already indications by journalists in the know that terrorist provocations or an October Surprise timed to coincide with the presidential elections can be anticipated in the autumn of this year (see “Office Pool, 2004” by William Safire, *New York Times*, December 31, 2003).

Bearing in mind the role played by the American intelligence forces in South America and the Middle East over the past three decades, why is it so preposterous to assume that US political and intelligence services would stoop to such provocations against its political opponents?

Le Carré represents a layer of intellectuals and writers, in Britain, Europe and the US itself, who were at one time close to the establishment and have an intimate knowledge of the workings of bourgeois institutions and politics, but are now profoundly alarmed at the shift in economic and political relations since the collapse of the Cold War framework. In *Absolute Friends*, le Carré has drawn deep from his reserves of literary skills and social and historical knowledge to write a thoroughly entertaining and very topical novel that deserves a wide readership.



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