

INTRODUCTION

by Shane Maloney

Strange as it now seems, there was once a time when the protagonist of a literary novel could be both a hero and an officer of the CIA.

That time was the Cold War, specifically the period before America's foreign adventures turned sour and gave a permanently hollow ring to the rhetoric of freedom. It was a period of Manichean struggle when the forces of good and evil wrestled in the darkness for the destiny of humanity. It was the heyday of the spy novel.

Espionage fiction had long existed, of course. Rudyard Kipling's *Kim* told of a young boy's induction into the Great Game between the British and Russian empires. John Buchan's *Richard Hannay* novels had portrayed covert geo-political manoeuvrings at the time of the First World War, and W. Somerset Maugham drew on his secret service experience in Moscow during the Bolshevik Revolution to create *Ashenden*. By the late Thirties, Eric Ambler was rescuing the genre from its propagandistic pomposities, giving it a realistic feel and infusing it with a more cosmopolitan perspective.

As the Second World War metastasised into the Cold War, Graham Greene and Ian Fleming took the fiction of clandestine political conflict into widely divergent directions. As a result of their wartime service in various cloak-and-dagger brigades, both were familiar with the secret world. But Fleming must have had a lot more fun in his tussles with the unspeakable enemy. Greene's characters confront moral dilemmas. James Bond just blasts everything that moves.

But it was two writers of the next generation who brought espionage fiction to its literary apogee. They, too, were former spooks, and their novels reflect an insider's perspective of covert operations—not merely a familiarity with the tradecraft of espionage but also a kind of gloomy recognition of the inherently poisonous nature of a job based on deception and betrayal. One was John Le Carré, an Englishman; the other, Charles McCarry, an American.

Charles who, you ask? And there's the rub. While Le Carré is a famous name, McCarry remains relatively unknown, even in the United States. His is an undeserved obscurity, and his return to the literary field is a welcome development, both for its own sake and because it has prompted the reissuing by Scribe of some of his earlier, stronger novels. There is life in the old boy yet.

The Tears of Autumn was recommended to me by a retired politician, a man with a fine appreciation for conspiracies, real and fictitious. Originally published in 1974, it had long been out of print, and McCarry's name was unfamiliar to me. My confidential informant took a well-thumbed paperback copy from his library shelf and handed it to me on the implicit understanding that here was something rare and valuable and not to be mislaid.

I devoured it whole, returned it promptly, and found myself rewarded with loan of *The Miernik Dossier*, *The Secret Lovers*, and *The Last Supper*. Just as I had once explored the shadowy corners of 'the Circus' in the company of George Smiley, I now tailed Paul Christopher through the tangled web of 'the Outfit'. And for years after, I poured my praises for McCarry's work into any likely ear I could find. To most, the name was unfamiliar. And the books were, in any case, unobtainable except through second-hand vendors on the internet. Whenever, by luck, I found another aficionado, we reinforced each other's opinion that McCarry was a terrific writer, and gloated at our own cleverness for knowing about him.

Charles McCarry was born in 1930, joined the army at eighteen, and began to write for its newspaper, *The Stars and Stripes*, while posted in Germany. He subsequently edited a small-town newspaper in Lisbon, Ohio, and became a speech writer for President Eisenhower. At that point, he was recruited into the CIA by its head, Allen Dulles. From 1958 to 1967, he spent ten years as an undercover field agent in Europe, Asia, and Africa. He simultaneously pursued his career as a journalist, contributing to *National Geographic* and many major American newspapers. His first novel, *The Miernik Dossier*, was published in 1973. Its protagonist is Paul Christopher, an agent whose cover is a job as a freelance journalist.

The Tears of Autumn appeared the following year. Its central character is again Paul Christopher, and its plot concerns an event that has stimulated more conjecture and spawned more speculation than probably any other in history—the public assassination of

President John Fitzgerald Kennedy on 22 November 1963.

Who killed Kennedy? According to the Warren Commission, established to sift the evidence, Lee Harvey Oswald had acted alone, and no persuasive evidence existed of a conspiracy to assassinate the president. But even before the official verdict was announced, a welter of contradictory theories began to emerge. The Mafia was behind it, or the Cubans, or the FBI, or a secret cabal of government and military insiders. More than forty years after the event, a majority of Americans still believe that Kennedy's death was the product of a conspiracy.

The Tears of Autumn conjures up a scenario which is both fictitious and strangely convincing, and tells it in a way that is never less than totally compelling. What makes it all the more appealing is the fact that it fingers none of the usual suspects, but rather suggests that the assassination was an early instance of what would come to be called blowback.

The man who discerns the hidden connections and assembles the evidence is Paul Christopher—and it is to him that we now turn.

Christopher is a paragon of his profession, untarnished by morals or politics. He writes poetry. He is intelligent, handsome, and charming. His French is unaccented and he doesn't much like the idea of torture. He is fearless, calm, loyal, and modest. When, early in the book, an arrogant White House aide questions his value, his CIA boss cites three things, 'First, he's intelligent and entirely un sentimental. Second, he will go to any lengths to get the truth ... Third, he is not subject to fear.'

In short, he's a goody two-shoes. And in any other author's hands he would be a right pain in the backside. Fortunately, Charles McCarry has produced a character whose near-saintly qualities are constructed within a framework of institutional cynicism and imminent danger. The result is a man poised precariously between the best and the worst of human behaviour. And the fact that the story unfolds as a kind of prelude to the folly and brutality of the American war in Vietnam lends Paul Christopher an almost Quixotic quality.

For Christopher and his colleagues in covert intelligence, the highest goal is truth—'cleansed of rationalisation and every other modifier'. So when it becomes clear that their political masters would prefer not to know the truth, that they fear its consequences,

it is perfectly consistent of Christopher to quit his job and set out to satisfy his curiosity for no other motive than his personal integrity.

There's a girl, of course, to use the parlance of the day. Molly runs Paul Christopher's office in Rome, hired to flesh out his cover as a globetrotting foreign correspondent. She has beautiful legs, a soft way of smiling and skillful hands. They spend much of their time together in bed, ruminating between tousled sheets upon love, life, and the whole damn thing. Interestingly, she is an Australian. 'If you have to live with a foreigner,' his station chief tells him when her security clearance comes back from Canberra, 'an Australian is as clean as you can do.' While Paul is out and about, doing what spies do, Molly sends badly written fashion stories to the *Women's Weekly*. Her role is strictly ancillary. She is there to prove to him that love is possible. Asserting ownership of her body, she lays it before him. They don't make girls like that anymore, even in fiction.

Apart from the originality and plausibility of its premise, what raises *The Tears of Autumn* above the ruck is the assurance of McCarry's prose. The narrative is tightly constructed, fast moving, and persuasive. The characters are vividly portrayed and psychologically credible, creatures of their time, and as droll a collection of oddities as ever assembled by a spinner of yarns. The ex-Nazi midget burglar alone is worth the price of admission. The language is economical and insightful, and bones of Hemingway and Conrad protrude from the syntax, underpinning the hectic pace and occasional gunfire with a knowing, elegiac mood. The tone, like Christopher himself, never falters.

When the Cold War ended, the spy novel took a nose dive. Many of the assumptions that underpinned the literature of espionage no longer held true. Both sides were tarred with the brush of moral equivalence. Reality had outstripped illusion. The tropes were exhausted. The dead-letter drop was a dead letter.

Yet there is more to *The Tears of Autumn* than a resonance of the past. There is also the kind of prescience that stems from a keen appreciation of what happens when the truth is manipulated, fabricated, or ignored by powerful interests who think themselves invincible.

Asked what he believes in, Paul Christopher replies, 'I believe in consequences.'