

Agent Running in the Field (One Novel: Two Reviews)

John Le Carré (Viking, 2019), 288 pp.

Reviewed by John Kavanagh

Nathaniel, known to all simply as Nat, a 25-year veteran of Britain's Secret Intelligence Service, is facing an uncertain future. Just returned to London from a tour in Tallinn, he assumes his career will soon come to an end. Nat's was a busy career, running varied agent-handling operations under consular and diplomatic cover in Moscow, Prague, Bucharest, Budapest, Tbilisi, Trieste, and Helsinki. He is a seasoned and successful Russia specialist. He deserves to finish his labors at a comfortably secure headquarters desk. But an unexplained untoward incident during his last posting has him on the outs with his seniors. Nat anticipates summary dismissal. It doesn't happen. To his surprise Nat is given a management position. He will take over the helm at the Haven, a London based substation of SIS's Russia Department. Nat is pleased to avoid the sacking he expected, but he has no illusions regarding the relevance of his new workplace, "a dumping ground for resettled defectors of nil value and fifth-rate informers on the skids." An occupational dead end. Nat reluctantly accepts the job.

Thus John Le Carré sets the stage for his 25th novel, *Agent Running in the Field*, Nat's first-person narrative of how the targets, enemies, and obsessions over a decades' long career can return to engage the veteran officer at the strangest times and in the unlikeliest places, such as the Haven. It doesn't take long for the action to start.

Sergei, a former Moscow Centre-trained deep-cover agent under the Haven's care who, as an exchange student, defected to British authorities on his arrival in England has sent out a "must-meet" distress signal. Short on staff, Nat goes to meet him. Sergei, who has been in England for over a year, has never been contacted by his Russian handlers, and it seems obvious that Moscow Centre has assumed his defection and written him off.

But Sergei convinces Nat that Moscow has indeed reached out to its sleeper agent to "bring him back to life." Why? Nat carefully controls Sergei's subsequent covert exchanges with Moscow and the Centre's ultimate

intention is revealed: Sergei is tasked to carry out an extensive site-vetting research assignment throughout north London. He must identify and report on three ideal, fully secure clandestine meeting locations.

Moscow Centre plans to bring a covert senior officer to England to hold a daring one-on-one meeting with a British volunteer defector, a senior government official with full knowledge of ongoing Anglo-American intelligence negotiations. The potential intelligence gain justifies the great risk of an in-country meeting. The encounter must be covered, the defector exposed, the secrets secured. Nat's Haven team is marshaled into action. They must cover all three potential meeting sites with full audiovisual monitoring. They must blanket the three neighborhoods with seconded teams of trained discrete watchers. They must identify the Russian officer on arrival and trail him to the meeting. They must deal with the nagging tension of waiting for the operation to unfold. As does the reader. And the ensuing action does not disappoint.

Le Carre's familiar strengths are on ample display here. As always, the closer the story gets to the pavement, to the authentic intricate tactics of classic cat and mouse streetcraft, the more engrossing and instructive the story becomes. The details of Sergei's extensive training at Moscow Centre's deep-cover asset academy is an eye-opening primer on the Centre's selection and grooming of its long-term sleeper assets deployed to the West. Sergei's recalling his strenuous lessons there has Nat again contemplating the inspiring dedication and dogged ingenuity of his Russian counterparts, his career's main target, the source of his triumphs and failures. Sergei's propitious "awakening" has given Nat an unexpected last chance to best his Centre rivals. He is determined to make the best of it despite the obstructions posed by incompetent seniors, political rivals, obtuse bureaucrats, niggling regulations, all patiently handled by Nat.

Women play important roles. Nat's wife Prue, a pro bono civil rights attorney, is a former SIS officer who made up a tandem couple with Nat during an early tour in Moscow. Florence, the one bright light in Nat's

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Haven's crew, is a brilliant young probationer whom Nat is happy to mentor. After she survives a grilling by a senior operational "murder board," she impatiently awaits approval for her first operational proposal. Nat steadies her with wise counsel: "A treasury committee has to give its blessing. . . . One mandarin apiece from Treasury, Foreign Office, Home Office, and Defense. Plus a couple of co-opted parliamentarians who can be trusted to do what they're told." And Valentina, the veteran director of Moscow Centre's spy school, provides one of the story's surprise twists and offers a detailed primer on her service's version of the "mad minute" security quiz asset handlers impose on their recruited charges.

The story takes place in the current day, and Le Carré playfully sprinkles in topical material as Nat and his colleagues discuss Big Pharma, Brexit, Putin, global warming, millennials, and the vagaries of American foreign policy. Le Carre offers no slant or bias in these

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Same Novel, Different Perspective

By J.E. Leonardson

John Le Carré seems to have written *Agent Running in the Field* in a fit of white-hot anger. For him, the chief villains in his story are the current US administration and the UK's Brexit supporters, but corrupt members of the British elites who do the bidding of Russian oligarchs are not far behind. The plot centers around Nat, a fiftyish and determinedly nonpolitical SIS case officer who is nearing retirement, and his wife, Prudence (Prue), a fashionably liberal lawyer who fights for human rights and against Big Pharma. In the course of an espionage investigation, Nat learns that a spy within British intelligence has given Russia information on secret US-UK negotiations for a post-Brexit trade deal. In the talks, Nat finds out, Washington is taking ruthless advantage of Britain's desperate need for the deal to force London into a treaty that will also destroy the "social democratic institutions of the European Union and [dismantle its] international trading tariffs . . . [and] disseminate fake news on a large scale in order to aggravate" tensions among the states remaining in the EU. (245)

sections but there is a good amount of humor in it, perhaps more than in any of the author's post-Karla Trilogy books since *The Tailor of Panama* (1996).

The book's main value is the author's depiction of Nat himself, a skilled and proud professional, who is forced by time and circumstance to take the measure of both his career and life. His moody "was the game worth playing" musings are perhaps predictable after two decades of unresolved contests in an arena dominated by shadows. Nat's at the end of the line, but his quiet patriotism and pride in his work buoy him. He enjoys mentoring junior officers, and he recalls advice a mentor once gave him: "If you spy long enough, the show comes round again." As it has for the author, who thankfully continues to use our business as the background landscape for exceptionally well crafted novels.

Another very entertaining, thoughtful spy story from John Le Carre, and warmly recommended.

The spy volunteered first to the Germans in an effort to save Europe, but they turned him away; subsequently, the Russians false-flagged him, so he believes he actually was accepted by Berlin. Nat is ordered to confront the spy, tell him the truth of his situation, and then double him against Moscow. Nat, however, decides that he no longer can remain apolitical and casts his lot with the European Union. Instead of following his orders, Nat and Prue help the spy escape, though it is not clear where he will go or what will become of the couple. (There's also a romantic angle, slightly reminiscent of *Casablanca*, as Florence, Nat's former subordinate, and the spy fall in love, marry, and depart together.)

Le Carré makes some good points along the way. His main concern is the corruption of Western institutions and the corrosion of faith in truth and the basic workings of democratic government. One of the turning points for Nat concerns a peeress who is member of an intelligence oversight board who refuses to approve a technical operation in the residence of an oligarch living in London;

she turns out to be an investment manager for, among others, the very same oligarch. Florence, who planned the operation and quit in disgust when it was halted, tells him that the peeress plays the “financial authorities like a harp” and is an expert at finding ways to “circumvent regulations that don’t regulate.” When Nat asks what he should do with this information, Florence tells him, “Fuck all. That’s what everyone does, isn’t it?” (157–58)

Le Carré is not entirely cynical, however. A German intelligence officer (and former lover of Nat’s) tells him that “not all Americans are Europhobes. Not all Brits are passionate for a trade alliance with Trump’s America at any price.” It was because they are convinced that the British eventually will return to sanity and rejoin the European family, she tells Nat, that Berlin was “unwilling to engage in spying activities against a friendly nation” and refused to accept the volunteer. (245)

Setting aside whatever one thinks of Le Carré’s Europeanist views and fears of a conspiracy between the US administration and Brexiters in Downing Street, the unfortunate fact is that this novel just does not work. Rather than deliver a crackling espionage yarn that looks at the state of international politics, intelligence, and the people who do the day-to-day work of statecraft as he did in his early novels, Le Carré just leaves the reader with a muddle. The first problem is structural—*Agent Running* moves at such a glacial pace that more than halfway through the reader is still wondering when the espionage will start and what mystery, exactly, will have to be solved. This might not matter too much, as a lot of readers will quit before then, put off by leaden prose and forgettable, cartoonish characters—Prue, especially, seems to be

almost a caricature of a trendy lawyer—whose words Le Carré frequently italicizes so that you will understand precisely how he believes they emphasize their speech. It’s a bit much and soon serves only to annoy. Perseverance brings only a modest reward, moreover. The action in the last 50 pages is suspenseful and keeps the reader guessing, but it has taken Le Carré so long to set things up that he has to rush to finish the story and at least one critical question (how did the Russians learn about and so cleverly deceive the volunteer?) goes unanswered. Such plotting is not what readers expect from Le Carré, to say the least.

It also is curious that Le Carré presents Nat’s decision to help the spy as an honorable choice. From the start of his career, Le Carré has had a well-deserved reputation for skillful explorations of the ambiguities of intelligence work and some readers may remember that in *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy* Smiley was not entirely unsympathetic to Bill Haydon’s motives. But if Le Carré wants us to see Nat’s choice as an echo of Smiley’s understanding of the ambiguities of intelligence work, he does not bring it off—the spy, however unwittingly, is working for Vladimir Putin’s regime, one of the main supports for the very people who so anger Le Carré and the beneficiary of their misdeeds.

The problem with this book is that it contains too much complaining as Le Carré indulges himself in an extended tantrum against people and political views he doesn’t like. This makes it hard to find a redeeming quality in *Agent Running in the Field*, which settles for simplistic explanations rather than take the opportunity to explore the personalities and motivations of the players in the highest-stakes intelligence contest of our time.

The reviewer: J. E. Leonardson is the penname of a CIA analyst.



