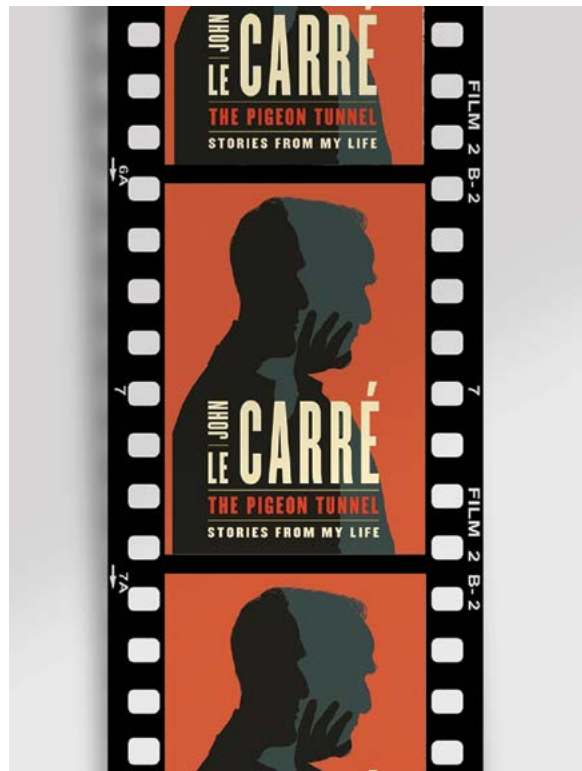


intelligence in public media

The Pigeon Tunnel *Stories from My Life*

Reviewed by Resolute Lee

Director: Errol Morris
Released By: Apple TV, 2023
Length: 1 hour, 34 minutes
Reviewer: Resolute Lee is the pen name of an ODNI officer.



Errol Morris's biographical, documentary interview, *The Pigeon Tunnel*, of David Cornwell—better known to the world by his pen name John le Carré—is an enthralling conversation between two kindred storytellers. Based on interviews completed in 2019 shortly before Cornwell's death in 2020, the film is an adaptation of le Carré's *The Pigeon Tunnel: Stories From My Life*.^a

The interview is one that could only have been crafted with the artifice of two master storytellers. Morris pits himself opposite Cornwell in an engagingly heartfelt and at times sorrowful exploration of Cornwell's life, delving into the complexities of family and relationships, education, and a career spanning both the Security Service (MI5) and Secret Intelligence Service (MI6), and global

literary fame. Morris weaves Cornwell's rich, poetic prose with the visual metaphor of the subject seated within a literal wilderness of mirrors—a nod to the labyrinthine nature of counterintelligence.

The result is a mesmerizing piece that would captivate even a le Carré novice or those unfamiliar with Morris's Oscar winning work, including *The Fog of War*. Cornwell is polished and his observations astute, punctuated by flashes of the cunning that defined his most famous characters. The depths to which Cornwell unfolds the complexities of his personal and professional lives are profoundly human and altogether expressive. There is a cinematic elegance to the conversation, heightened by Morris's apparitional presence off screen.

a. Reviewed by CIA Chief Historian David Robarge in *Studies in Intelligence* 61, No. 1 (March 2017). Robarge explored the literary merits of the memoir in these pages, while Morris' film provides the essential visual and tonal accompaniment—the performance of the man behind the prose. See also Robarge, review of *Tradecraft: Writers on John le Carré*, *Studies in Intelligence* 70, No. 1 (March 2026).

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The Pigeon Tunnel

The interview adopts a conversational tone with a respectful tension that stems from Morris's own history; before becoming an Oscar-winning filmmaker, he worked as a private investigator. This background infuses the film with the energy of a professional interrogation, a match between a subject who spent a lifetime crafting legends and an interlocutor who spent a career unearthing them.

The mastery begins in the prelude. Morris confesses, "Usually, I have absolutely no idea of where to begin, but you gave me an idea." Cornwell, revealing a characteristic touch of counterintelligence curiosity, asks, "And what was that?"

Morris responds, "You asked me about the nature of our relationship."

Cornwell emerges from behind the practitioner's mask: "It went further than that, I think. It said, who are you? Because sometimes, you're a spectral figure, sometimes you're God. And sometimes you're present. I needed to know who I was talking to. Were you my friend across the fire? Were you a stranger on a bus? Who are you?"

When Morris suggests he might be unable to answer. Cornwell smiles. "Then we'll struggle on and find out who you are."

The prose is engaging and reminiscent. Cornwell is thoroughly expressive, humorous, with a sarcastic self-deprecation that captures his wry wit.

This opening salvo reveals the pace of the match to come; two curious lions circling one another. It isn't long before the ghosts of the past emerge: shadows of an unrepentant, beguiled father and the early abandonment of his mother. Cornwell identifies the source material for a 60-year body of literary work that entailed 26 novels (many of which became films), one memoir, and many nonfiction essays and short stories, invoking Graham Greene's observation that "childhood is the credit balance of the writer. That's not a lament, just a self-examination." This pointed reflection offers a rare glimpse into the complexities of betrayal and duplicity that feature so prominently in his novels.

For the intelligence professional, the highlight of the film is a discussion regarding the boundary between fact and fiction. Morris asks, "Am I in a world of fiction, am I in a world of fact, am I in some strange blend of the two?"

Cornwell's response offers a whisper of truth regarding the tradecraft of writing: "I have tried over these conversations to talk about the process of abstraction from real life...I cannot define for you where reality goes through the secret door into fiction. I would much rather go back to the notion I painted, that I live in that bubble and I import stuff." As he speaks, his fingers dance beneath his chin, veiling a sheepish grin that suggests he is still, even in his final days, protecting the crown jewels of his private history.

The Pigeon Tunnel explores the confluence of truth, memory, and imagination. Cornwell questions the nature of object truth and memory, offering that, "we should find another name for the way we see past events that are still alive in us." This reflection delves further with Cornwell positing how the craft of writing entails abstracting from nonfiction and fictionalizing it. Those abstractions are the whispers of truth swept over the pages as human frailty, moral ambiguity, intrigue, doubt, cowardice, and complex nuance. Cornwell observes, "My business has been to try to make credible fables out of worlds that I visited or that visited me. The journey for me has been one of the imagination. The imaginative refuge from reality. The recreation of chaos. Not in an orderly way, but in a comprehensible, individualized way that makes people feel not a la James Bond, 'I wish this were me.' But more kind of, 'Jesus, I hope this isn't me.'"

Throughout the engagement, Cornwell holds back. Sadly, this would be his final interview. So, perhaps it is fitting that an author renowned for his guardedness should be paired with a director as inquisitive as Morris. ■