

THE
CONNELL SHORT GUIDE
TO MICHAEL FRAYN'S



Spies

“The Connell Guides are brief, attractive, erudite,
and to the point. Bravo!”

SIR TOM STOPPARD

ALL YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THE
NOVEL IN ONE CONCISE VOLUME

by David Isaacs

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Introduction

Spies, wrote Peter Bradshaw in *The Guardian*, has “a classic English theme: the bittersweet adventure from childhood, recollected in old age, in which the mysterious doings of the grown-ups were trespassed on and misinterpreted”. Books as diverse as *Great Expectations*, *The Go-Between* and *Atonement* fall into this category. *Spies*, first published in 2002, is a worthy addition to the list and shares many of the same preoccupations as these novels; it is interested in memory, identity, loss of innocence and perception. It is, in other words, a book about how we make sense of the world.

A summary of the plot

Stephen, an old man living in Germany, is reminded of his childhood by the smell of a privet hedge in bloom. It reminds him of a particularly troubling period during the Second World War, when he was a prepubescent boy in England. In his old age, he can remember little of the events of that summer, but he knows they were important. He travels back to England, to the street he grew up in, and the memories start flooding back.

The first thing he remembers is a visit to his best friend Keith’s house down the road. He

remembers Keith's despotic father and his poised, glamorous mother. He remembers Keith's kind aunt and her husband, an absent war hero. He remembers how he idealised this neat, ordered family. He remembers how a tragic series of events was set in motion when, one day, out of nowhere, Keith said to him: "My mother is a German spy." The events of that summer are then narrated by the older Stephen, who struggles to piece it together from his failing memory.

The boys, full up on spy stories and war propaganda, seeing a task of national importance in front of them, decide to investigate. They search Keith's mother's study and find her diary, which has an 'x' marked every month and a few exclamation marks throughout the year. They see these as clues, a record of secret activity, but an adult reader understands that the x's mark out her menstrual cycle and the exclamation marks record her sexual activity.

With their belief that Keith's mother is a spy now confirmed, the boys start keeping a careful watch of her. Spying from a hollowed-out clearing in a privet hedge, they notice that she keeps visiting Keith's aunt's house, leaving the house, disappearing, and then miraculously leaving the house again. They imagine she has access to a secret passage and follow her. But they cannot work out where she is disappearing to.

On one of these occasions, she spots them

spying on her. She approaches them and tells them off. Stephen notices she has some kind of slimy substance on her hands that she is trying to rub off, and immediately he works out where she has been disappearing to: there is a tunnel under a railway bridge, full of slime, which leads to an area of rural dilapidation known as The Lanes. It had never occurred to them that she might have had reason to go in that direction.

Later, they go through the tunnel themselves and find a closed box which, with trepidation, they open. It contains 20 cigarettes and a piece of paper with a single x on it. More clues.

They take it in turns to keep watch from their hideout. One day, Stephen is visited by a girl of his age who lives on the street – Barbara Berrill. Barbara has been spying on him, and she tells Stephen that Keith's aunt has a secret boyfriend.

That night, Stephen returns to the mysterious box. He opens it up again and finds a cloth and a sock. He feels someone watching him and is suddenly terrified. The moon disappears behind a cloud and the watching figure runs away. Stephen doesn't see who it was.

Next time they look for the box, it has disappeared: the Germans are on to them. They explore further beyond the tunnel and see an old tramp hiding underneath a sheet of corrugated iron. They start hitting the corrugated iron with pieces of wood, and laugh at the tramp's terror.

They run away when they think they may have killed him.

Later, in Keith's house, his abusive father accuses Keith of stealing a thermos flask from their picnic hamper. The boys work out that Keith's mother is taking things to the tramp – who they now believe is a gunned-down German pilot – and they know where the thermos must be, but they keep silent. Keith's father punishes his son, and Stephen runs to find Keith's mother. He tells her about the situation and she is devastated.

A line has been crossed: Stephen and Keith do not play together any more. Stephen spends lots of time in their hideout, however, and is visited regularly by Barbara Berrill. They spend more and more time together, and start smoking cigarettes and he seems to forget his childish spy story. Eventually, they kiss: he's growing up.

Later, Keith's mother visits Stephen again and asks him to deliver a basket to the tramp. He agrees to. But before he can, Keith's father finds him and instructs him to hand it over, which he does. Stephen is upset and, pitiingly, takes a substitute basket to the tramp, who surprises him by knowing his name. The tramp talks to Stephen in perfect English; he doesn't appear to be German. Stephen agrees to take a token back to Keith's mother, a silk map of Germany, and to give her the simple message, "For ever".

The next time Stephen and Keith meet, Keith

attacks Stephen with a carving knife, accusing him of breaking their oath of secrecy. Like father like son. Stephen runs away and tries to hide the scarf at the railway embankment. When he gets there, he finds two policemen clearing away the tramp's dead body; he's been hit by a train. It looks like suicide.

In the final chapter, the older Stephen sums up: the man who died was, in fact, Keith's uncle, the war hero who had lost his nerve and deserted. Scared of being court-martialled, he had been living rough, carrying on a relationship with his wife, and also with Keith's mother, whom he'd always loved more. Finally, Stephen reveals what he didn't know when he was a child: that he is, himself, a German Jew. He was the German spy on the street.

Memory

Spies begins with what is known to literary critics as a "Proustian moment". Marcel Proust's great novel, *À la Recherche du Temps Perdu* (*In Search of Lost Time*) describes the attempts of an elderly narrator to recall his early life. He can remember little when he tries to but when one day he eats a madeleine dipped in tea, he is surprised by a strong recollection of dipping a madeleine in his tea as a child, and subsequently a whole volley of other childhood memories come to him unbidden. A

Proustian Moment, then, is an ‘involuntary memory’ (a phrase used by Proust himself) prompted by a once familiar but long forgotten sense experience.

The narrator of *Spies*, Stephen, is surprised when the perfume of a privet hedge’s white flower reminds him strongly of his childhood: “I catch it on the warm evening air... and for a moment I’m a child again and everything’s before me – all the frightening half-understood promise of the world” (1)*. So strong are both the scent and the powerful feeling of nostalgia** it prompts that he is moved to revisit the place he grew up in and try, like Proust’s narrator, to piece together from memory certain events from his childhood that seem in some way connected to that smell. Not such an easy task, however. “The past is a foreign country; they do things differently there.” So begins LP Hartley’s *The Go-Between*, a novel whose narrator is also remembering a misunderstanding from his childhood which had calamitous results***. If the past is a foreign country then it is one with strict border controls. And so

* Numbers in brackets refer to chapters.

** A Greek word, literally meaning ‘an ache to be home’.

*** This famous opening line is interesting in how it mingles the temporal and the geographical, just as the word nostalgia (meaning both homesickness and a longing for the past) does. In much of *Spies*, Frayn does the same: “There are cheap flights to that far-off nearby land” (1), Stephen jokes to his son at the start of the novel, meaning the past, and at the end he yearns to be in “the old country of the past” (11).

Stephen finds, as he tries to construct a narrative from his memories, that he is granted little access to his own history. In fact, all he can clearly remember is a few images and sense memories; these have lingered in his mind. Remembering thoughts and feelings, states of affairs and sequences, proves far more difficult. As Adam Mars-Jones wrote in his review of the novel for *The Observer*, “physical sensations – the feel of a tumbler of lemon barley, the taste of chocolate spread – survive better in memory than past states of mind.”

Memory, the novel suggests, constructs itself around a few isolated particulars. In Stephen’s case:

Glimpses of different things flash into my mind in random sequence, and are gone. A shower of sparks... A feeling of shame... someone unseen coughing, trying not to be heard... a jug covered by a lace weighted with four blue beads... (1)

Much like when we watch a film and see movement even though we know what we’re looking at is no more than a series of static images, memory is linear and fluid only because the mind fills in the gaps. But to bridge huge gaps between individual memories from so long ago is a hard task and Stephen struggles with it, not least because he cannot remember what order the

memories occurred in. The involuntary memories that come to him are jumbled up, with no clear chain of cause and effect. Lamenting his self-imposed task of constructing something solid from scattered fragments, like piecing together a broken vase*, he says:

It's so difficult to remember what order things occurred in – but if you can't remember that, then it's impossible to work out which led to which, and what the connection was. What I remember, when I examine my memory carefully, isn't a narrative at all... Certain words spoken, certain objects glimpsed. Certain gestures and expressions. Certain moods, certain weathers, certain times of day and states of light. Certain individual moments, which seem to mean so much, but which mean in fact so little until the hidden links between them have been found. (2)

When the hidden links are not found, the mind has to invent them.

Stephen's narration is full of hesitancy, full of comments like, "No, wait. I've got that wrong," (2) or "When is this?" (2) or, "Or have I got everything back to front?" (2). Memory is difficult, fallible, untrustworthy. The great poet of memory, William Wordsworth, who haunts the novel, knew that. His presence is never acknowledged but felt from the

* An image which, incidentally, occurs prominently in Ian McEwan's *Atonement*.

very first paragraph: "... for a moment I'm a child again and everything's before me – all the frightening half-understood promise of the world" (1). This contains a memory of some of the first lines of Wordsworth's epic poem, *The Prelude* – which, themselves, contain a memory of Milton's epic poem *Paradise Lost* (but more of that later). *The Prelude* sees the aging poet trying to reconstruct his childhood in verse. In the opening lines, he describes a breeze that "beats against" his cheek as "half-conscious" (anticipating Stephen's "half-understood"), before exclaiming, "The earth is all before me!" (anticipating Stephen's "everything's before me"). The word "half" occurs frequently in Wordsworth's poetry; it occurs frequently in *Spies*, too. For example, later in the opening chapter, Stephen says he only "half-remembers" that summer. The idea of half-consciousness, or half-understanding is, as we will see, central to the philosophy of *Spies*.

No poem has expressed the difficulty of memory better than the last poem in Wordsworth and Coleridge's 1798 collection *Lyrical Ballads*, 'Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey, on Revisiting the Banks of the Wye during a Tour. July 13, 1798'. In this poem, the speaker*, like Stephen, revisits a spot that had particular emotional significance to him when he was younger. And, like Stephen, he tries to recreate the

* Whom we can assume is Wordsworth.

particular feelings he felt and particular thoughts he thought at that place. But, try as he might, he finds he “cannot paint/What then I was”. The younger Wordsworth has fled, now exists inside the impenetrable walls that surround the old country of the past; all that remains of him are a few sense memories and images lingering disconnected inside the older Wordsworth’s head. Similarly, Stephen tells us half way through the novel that the younger Stephen’s head is “the very same head as the one that’s here on my shoulders thinking about it – and yet I’ve still no... idea what’s going on inside it” (7). The older man simply does not have access to the thoughts and feelings of the young boy.

But Stephen can do better than Wordsworth. He has access to something Wordsworth did not have access to: photographs. You can paint a portrait from a photograph, after all. And this is what Stephen does: “I shouldn’t have the slightest idea what Stephen Wheatley looks like if it weren’t for the snaps, or ever guess that he and I were related if it weren’t for the name written on the back” (2).

Identity

So there are two Stephens. To underline the point, Stephen reveals at the end of the novel that, though he didn’t know it as a child, he is in fact a German Jew. There’s Stephen Wheatley and there’s Stephen Weizler*. Many critics and reviewers are unimpressed by the trick that Frayn plays on his readers. Michiko Kakutani in the *New York Times* complained that “crucial information is clumsily withheld from the reader until the very last chapter”; she referred to the ending as “contrived”, “ham-handed” and “hokey”. It “undermines the reader’s willingness to trust in his narration”. Similarly, Max Watman in *New Criterion* asked: “if we are not to benefit from the older man’s perspective until the last dozen or so pages, why introduce him at the start?” Not all critics are so unhappy about the ending: the Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist John Updike described the revelation in the *New Yorker* as “artfully delayed” and Peter Bradshaw’s *The Guardian* review thought it “bravura”.

The naysayers miss something: the older Stephen is, himself, telling a story. He, himself, means to fashion an exciting and engaging narrative. To do so he knows he must create suspense, mystery and, most importantly, a believable character for the younger Stephen – a

* Stephen’s birth name.