

Playing Tigers

TINKER, TAILOR, SOLDIER, SPY
by JOHN LE CARRÉ
355 pages. Knopf. \$7.95

The subject at hand is not who put the overalls in Mrs. Murphy's existential chowder but who is the mole in Mr. Control's Circus. Control, as John le Carré followers know, is the director of British Intelligence. The Circus is his sad collection of far-flung agents, now for the most part disabused old cold warriors who

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stay numb in order to survive or glumly hope that "somewhere the path of pain and betrayal must end." And a mole? A mole, of course, is a turncoat working for a foreign government. He is planted in his native society (in this case British) years and years and years in advance and then left to burrow upward to a position of power from which he sends crucial information to England's enemies (in this case Moscow).

As the book opens, Control is dead. The Circus is all but undone, for the undetected mole, in the guise of a career British agent, now dominates it. Oh cursed spite! And the only man left in England to uncover the mole and set things right is old George Smiley, Author le Carré's perennial round man. Smiley still wears good clothes badly, has a memory like a computer bank, and is married to Lady Ann, a wife whose aristocratic reticence does not include denial of sexual access to a number of illicit cloak-and-dagger suitors.

This is le Carré's first Circus act since a mildly lamentable foray into straight fiction (*The Naive and Sentimental Lover*—1972). If it is not exactly a three-ring literary homecoming, it is a splendid assemblage of the virtues displayed in previous le Carré thrillers. Fine public-school scenes (see *A Murder of Quality*). Gently savage reminders that lingering old-boyism from the heroic days of World War II can lead to lethal folly in the crocodile world of modern espionage. Brisk demonstrations that hell hath no fury like that of feuding bureaucrats (*The Looking Glass War*, *A Small Town in Germany*).

The fascinating thing about the spy war between East and West, le Carré once explained, "is the way the directors live and work with files and papers and they plot and scheme. Then suddenly there comes a moment of cri-

sis when all the files grow arms and legs and it isn't funny any more." Le Carré can still raise Circus shoptalk to the level of art. The intricate procedures of his baby sitters (bodyguards), lamplighters (watchers, safe-house men), and pavement artists (shadowers) rarely palls. As Smiley pursues the mole, lives, careers and ancient loyalties are put in jeopardy along his secret path.

For all its arms and legs, the book remains something of a paper chase. Why? In part, one suspects, because the struggle occurs mostly in Little England, a political shire now shorn of power and purpose, where there may simply be too much central heating for the spy who comes in from the cold. (One of the reasons the mole becomes a mole, in fact, seems to be the 1956 Suez disaster. He joins Moscow in part to be where the historic action is.) Le Carré heightens suspense by lowering the number of suspect moles to two. The remorseless world of international espionage is thus transformed into something very like a traditional English detective story with the suspects figuratively locked in the English country house as the sleuth (Smiley) pokes around and the tantalized spectators wonder if he will dare pin it on the butler.

Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy is one of the best tales of the year so far. But by le Carré's highest standards it is, as Evelyn Waugh remarked in another connection, simply "creamy English charm playing tigers." ■ Timothy Foote