

An Ordinary Spy

Joseph Weisberg. New York: Bloomsbury, 2008. 276 pp.

Reviewed by John Ehrman

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“What is it like to work at the CIA? What kinds of people work there? What do you do?” These are questions relatives, friends, and curious strangers ask us all the time, assuming, as many do, that we are all involved in some aspect of espionage and can tell thrilling tales of the spy world. Alas, most of us in positions to be asked those questions are not so engaged and unable to give a broad view of what it is like to work in intelligence. Novelists have long tried to fill this gap, however, and the latest is former CIA case officer Joseph Weisberg. On the surface, his semi-autobiographical novel, *An Ordinary Spy*, is a satisfactory spy story but, when looked at closely, turns out to be a nasty and poorly executed look at our world.

The novel is narrated by Mark Ruttenberg, a young case officer fired by the Agency halfway through his first overseas tour. In preparing for his assignment, Mark comes across the case file for TDTRACER but finds that the file ends abruptly. No one can tell him the outcome of the case or one linked to it, LXMALIBU, and he goes overseas wondering what happened. His tour soon turns into a disaster. Mark starts developing a secretary, Daisy, at another embassy, but the case does not look like it will yield much intelligence, and he is instructed to drop it. Mark does so, but soon begins a secret love affair with Daisy. The chief of station finds out, and she sends him home for dismissal.

Mark then returns to his hometown of Chicago and takes a job as a high school history and literature teacher. Mysteriously, he receives contact information for Bobby Goldstein, another former case officer and TRACER’s handler. Mark goes to see Goldstein, and the last two-thirds of the book are Goldstein’s recounting of the full stories of the TRACER and MALIBU cases. Satisfied that he has learned the truth, Ruttenberg returns to Chicago and his teaching job. In the book’s closing pages, Daisy appears at Mark’s doorstep on a cold, rainy night, and we are left to believe that they will spend their lives together.

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As entertainment, *An Ordinary Spy* is by no means an exceptional espionage novel, but neither is it a bad one. The story moves along quickly and the plot, while not overly complicated, raises enough questions to hold the reader's interest, although Weisberg's decision to block out text—sometimes just a word or an acronym, other times up to an entire page—with heavy black bars, to give the impression of a redacted official report, makes the text choppy and at times hard to read. Weisberg's faux redactions start with the name of Mark's area division at CIA headquarters, move on to the country where Mark was stationed, and extend to the point of covering the names of dishes cooked by his characters. Despite this, undemanding readers will find that *An Ordinary Spy* is a perfectly agreeable companion for a cross-country flight or a day at the beach.

Weisberg has greater ambitions for his book, however.

"My goal was to write the most realistic spy novel that had ever been written," he told the *New York Times* in December 2007. Achieving realism in an espionage novel—that is, giving readers three dimensional characters, a credible sense of place and time, and accurate details of how intelligence services work—is no easy task. Indeed, given that *An Ordinary Spy* is Weisberg's first novel, his belief that it can walk in the company of books by the masters of the genre, starting with Joseph Conrad and extending through Graham Greene and John le Carré, or even those of slightly lesser figures like Eric Ambler, Len Deighton and David Ignatius, is breathtaking. It is a claim worth looking at, too, because it raises the question of what constitutes a great espionage novel.



The major espionage writers have much in common with one another. They are men of great literary talent, serious purposes, and wide ranging

experiences that they bring to bear in crafting their tales. Conrad, for example, traveled the world as a merchant seaman before turning to writing, Greene had served in British intelligence during World War II, Le Carré was both a British diplomat and intelligence officer, and Ignatius covered the Lebanese civil war for the *Wall Street Journal*. These writers gave a lot of thought to what they had seen. Whether it was Conrad considering extremist politics in *The Secret Agent* (1907), Le Carré and Greene living through the violence of the mid-20th century and the uncertainties of the early Cold War period, or Ignatius mulling over the gruesome affairs of the Middle East in *Agents of Innocence* (1987), they understood clearly that international politics and espionage were serious businesses, with serious

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consequences. They have been able to give a sense of what it is like to be in the world of intelligence, deftly painting scenes that create a sense of foreign places, or capturing

just the right aspect of bureaucratic routine to leave their readers with a sense of how things really work. Their characters, too, are fully formed people, with biographies and personalities as complex as any real person's. Often, they are middle-aged or older, with many years of experience in their trade that have given them wisdom and insight that their peers usually lack. They are smart but cautious, seeking ways to take action and control events but also with an understanding of their own limits and the limits of what they can achieve.

Taken as a whole, Le Carré's early novels probably are the best examples of how insightful espionage novels can be. Beginning with *Call for the Dead* (1961), and continuing through *The Spy Who Came in From the Cold* (1963), *The Looking Glass War* (1965), and the trilogy of *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy* (1974), *The Honourable School Boy* (1977) and *Smiley's People* (1979), Le Carré created an entire intelligence world focused on the operations of the Circus, his stand-in for Britain's MI-6. He

gave the Circus its own history, tradecraft, and cast of officers, the most famous of whom was George Smiley. Smiley provided continuity in the books, dedicating himself to the craft of espionage despite the torments of his wife's unfaithfulness (including an affair with Bill Haydon, the traitor in *Tinker, Tailor*), operational failures, and bureaucratic battles. Le Carré used these novels, moreover, to explore the politics of the Cold War and such themes as the morality of spying, the effects of betrayal, how national rivalries twisted individual behavior, and the decline of British society.

Anyone who wants to see Le Carré's mastery need only look at his early work. In just a few pages, the opening chapter of *Call for the Dead* provides a subtle and nuanced biography of Smiley, as well as an incisive description of the transformation of British intelligence from a small, clubby organization before World War II to the bureaucratic institution of the Cold War era. Gone, Le Carré writes, was the "inspired amateurism of a handful of highly qualified, underpaid men." Instead, they "had given way to the efficiency, bureaucracy, and intrigue of a large Government department," run by a politically savvy, ambitious, and cynical senior civil servant "feeding on the success of his subordinates." In his next book, Le Carré gave an unvarnished description of what it is like to work with spies. "What do you think spies are: priests, saints, and martyrs?" Alec Leamas, the protagonist of *The Spy Who Came in From the Cold*, famously asked. "They're a squalid procession of vain fools, traitors too, yes; pansies, sadists and drunkards, people who play cowboys and Indians to brighten their rotten lives," but whose efforts are nonetheless vital for the "safety of ordinary, crummy people like you and me." It is a statement that few people in the intelligence profession would dispute, and one that in a few sentences captures much of what espionage is about.



When measured against these standards, *An Ordinary Spy's* flaws quickly become clear. The problems begin with Weisberg himself, for he has little experience in intelligence or the wider world. According to the interview he gave to the *New York Times*, Weisberg graduated from college in 1987, and then traveled and worked as a job counselor. He joined the CIA in the early 1990s because he wanted meaningful work. Weisberg trained as a case officer but left the Agency after only a few years, and never served overseas. Like Mark Ruttenberg, he then moved to Chicago and, apparently, drifted for a number of years. Eventually he married and became a high school English and history teacher.

Weisberg's limited experiences do not seem to have given him much insight into intelligence or, for that matter, the human condition. As a result, he has little to say, and *An Ordinary Spy* is notable only for its lack of originality. Espionage, Weisberg says at the end of Bobby's story, does not accomplish much. TRACER's information, Bobby concludes in a statement meant to represent all espionage, was "nothing anyone was going to go crazy over...nothing worth risking [TRACER's] life." Moreover, as he relates TRACER's story, Weisberg makes it plain that he believes espionage serves only to ruin the lives of everyone involved. "So, four. That's how many lives I wrecked" in the TRACER operation, says Bobby. The idea that espionage accomplishes nothing is, of course, flat wrong, as anyone even passingly familiar with the history of intelligence knows. For a novel to point out that innocent people suffer in espionage is also old—to see that, one need only read the climactic last page of *The Spy Who Came in From the Cold*, where Liz, an innocent pawn in the Circus's operation, is shot dead at the Berlin Wall. In Le Carré's hands, the story leading up to Liz's death is filled with suspense and informed reflection; now, 45 years

later, the point has become familiar and, in Weisberg's hands, has declined into a cliché.

With little knowledge and little to say, Weisberg cannot create a convincing atmosphere. Spy novels often treat service headquarters as mysterious, forbidding places filled with intrigue, or lampoon them with descriptions of their bureaucratic follies. Weisberg, however, does neither, and his CIA Headquarters is merely an empty place that processes paperwork. Weisberg populates it with faceless drones who have titles—deputy chief, chief, chief HR—but not names, and who he typically describes as a “bland, decent guy stuck at GS-13 or 14.” Weisberg may be trying to make a point with this, but instead of giving us observations about the nature of bureaucracy or the people who work in it, he manages only to sound contemptuous of his former colleagues.

The same problems afflict the sections of the book that take place overseas. Weisberg blacks out the names of the country and city where the story takes place (why not just invent a place?), and all we learn about it is that it is hot, humid, and a fairly long airplane ride from Washington. It seems to be an uninteresting place, devoid of interesting characters. At the CIA station, as at Headquarters, people are faceless or objects of Mark's contempt. He never refers to the deputy chief by name, only as DCOS, and in a strained conversation with another colleague, relates that “I felt like saying, ‘You are a stupid, stupid, man. Dull witted and slow.’”

These points tell us much about Mark Ruttenberg himself. Mark is not much of a character on whom to build a story. His most striking aspect is his passivity—like a log on a river, he bumps along as the current directs him, and never seeks to control events. Mark joined the Agency only because a former professor of his suggested it, but did so in a half-hearted way. “I'd actually thought at the time that he was recruiting me, and I spent months after that waiting for the phone to ring. When it didn't, I sent in a resumé.” Mark behaves

no differently overseas. Months go by as he makes few contacts, his energy level drains, and he often seems bewildered by what goes on around him; even the affair with Daisy seems just to happen rather than result from any passion or pursuit on his part. It is hardly surprising then that the bulk of the book—and the only sections in which anything interesting happens—are where Bobby tells his story.

Mark is also astonishingly self-absorbed. He has no close relationships, other than Daisy, and he seems to have almost no interest in learning about her. Mark also seems unable to understand why his actions should have unfavorable consequences. He knows from the start that the affair violated Agency rules but, as he is fired, he wonders “How had I gotten into this position?...I'd certainly never been fired from anything. Never been really unsuccessful at anything.” Yet, the account that Mark supplies of his brief pre-Agency life—college and a few years at a Washington think tank—gives no reason to believe he ever accomplished much of anything, nor that he even understands what it means to set goals and work hard to achieve them. Why Weisberg believes that such an individual can speak credibly of the world of intelligence and has earned the right to speak critically of his coworkers is perhaps the central mystery of *An Ordinary Spy*.

What are we to make of *An Ordinary Spy*? The title gives a hint of what Weisberg is trying to tell us—that intelligence officers are ordinary people, working in ordinary bureaucracies and, all too often, ruining the lives of other ordinary people. But to be an ordinary person does not mean being an empty, passive person, and an ordinary landscape does not have to be bleak and featureless. It is sad that Mark Ruttenberg, and presumably Joseph Weisberg, lives in such a world. Weisberg's assumption that everyone else is stuck there, too, makes *An Ordinary Spy* a bitter, failed novel.

