

Reviews

Espionage and Exile: Fascism and Anti-Fascism in British Spy Fiction and Film. By PHYLLIS LASSNER. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press. 2016. xii+245 pp. £70. ISBN 978-1-4744-0110-4.

- R05605** Twentieth-century spy fiction is often assessed as escapism, but in Phylliss Lassner's *Espionage and Exile* the genre is not nearly so innocuous. Instead, it is an active form of 'political art', one that 'represents, dissects and warns' its audiences of the violence inherent to Fascist, Nazi, Communist, and even liberal regimes alike (p. 3). In Lassner's work, spy fiction's warnings emanate from the figure of the exile, displaced by conflict or political change and embroiled in espionage. Indeed, Lassner identifies the notion of exile as a psychological force that underwrites spy fiction in general, and examines this strange sense of statelessness that exists prominently within a genre closely aligned with the state. Lassner places the spy, alongside the refugee and the Jew, within a taxonomy of the exile, linking spies with these other marginalized figures through their insider/outsider status within a given society, manifest in their struggle for concealment and desire to 'pass' on one hand, but their exceptionality on the other.

In Lassner's assessment, the exile and the Jew are often found to be synonymous within spy fiction, and the book deftly weaves these identities together, exploring their mutually illuminating connections with reference to the work of well-known spy writers such as Eric Ambler and John le Carré, as well as the less well known, such as Helen McInnes and Pamela Frankau. Such a formulation serves to invert the typical assessments of the spy's place within a given political regime, drawing the spy away from the centre as an instrument of sovereign power and positioning them as subject to it, placing them squarely within biopolitical dimensions of identity inherent to the exile, and indeed the political regimes of the mid-twentieth century.

Lassner explores a wealth of engaging material and, as the extensive and justified attention to the suburban intrigues and 'dystopian homeland' (p. 190) of le Carré's first novel *Call for the Dead* (1961) demonstrates, the book seeks to distance itself from more openly populist fare, here identified as the work of Ian Fleming and Robert Ludlum. Although this makes the point well enough, it does mean that Lassner reiterates the familiar dichotomy between 'serious' and 'entertaining' spy fiction familiar to criticism of the genre. Undoubtedly, these more popular-minded fictions appear less serious in terms of their execution, but they still have much to offer a discussion of this kind, and a tendency towards theatrics in their plotting does not mean that the beliefs of their authors were any less seriously held than those on show elsewhere in this volume.

This criticism aside, *Espionage and Exile* is a perceptive and welcome addition to the field, especially in its movement away from the more familiar analytical approaches to the genre, and towards much-needed fresh ground. Lassner's work not only draws focus onto a vital aspect of the espionage genre, but also serves to illustrate how the themes of espionage fiction remain relevant to understanding the place of the individual in relation to regimes of power. Exile remains a continuing aspect of the modern world born of the political and global historical contexts

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Lassner considers; the figure of the exile is still very much with us, appearing nightly on our television screens and exhibiting the same 'rightlessness' that Hannah Arendt identified in 1951 (pp. 6–7): their politics and beliefs still suspect, their presence still a source of disquiet and anxiety to the settled. We are told too that the current refugee crisis is the largest migration of peoples since the Second World War; Lassner's insightful, occasionally unsettling book is a powerful reminder of just how few lessons we have learnt since then.

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