

Intelligence in Public Media

John le Carré's *The Night Manager*—the Miniseries

Directed by Susanne Bier (BBC, 2016), six 60-minute episodes.

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Eight of John le Carré's espionage novels have been made into movies and four into BBC miniseries; *Tinker, Tailor* was done as both. The ninth film, *Our Kind of Traitor*, opened in July 2016. *The Night Manager* is based on le Carré's eponymous novel (Knopf, 1993).

The story is about Jonathan Pine, a young British man who offers to infiltrate the entourage of an infamous British arms trader, Richard Roper, "the worst man in the world." In describing this double-agent operation, le Carré reverses and neatly compresses the classic recruitment cycle and reduces it to the essentials—engagement, enticement, and entrapment. This is perhaps the most elaborate dangle ever concocted, even longer than that of Alec Leamas in *The Spy Who Came in From the Cold*. It is a textbook on building a legend to backstop a dangle.

Pine arrives dramatically in Roper's life, saving Roper's son from violent kidnappers in a meticulously staged ruse. Pine credibly risks life and limb (he is actually seriously injured), and Roper feels obligated to see to his care and recovery. Roper is a complete sociopath, but he is generous and loyal to those he trusts. Roper has survived thus far by trusting his instincts, and he carefully vets Pine—or Pine's legend, as it turns out. He is drawn to Pine's narrative—on the run from a criminal past and unwilling to acknowledge, much less share, his aspirations. Roper senses a native cleverness and ease in Pine, and, having successfully vetted him, brings him into the arms business. The dangle is grasped, and Pine manages to discredit Roper's former number two and take his place. Roper's eventual downfall is due in part to his genuine affection for Pine, whom he sees as a younger version of himself.

The intelligence back story is even more complex than le Carré's usual "Good Brits versus Bad Brits and their evil CIA allies" storyline. Both Britain and the United States have established new agencies—hybrid law enforcement/intelligence agencies. Naturally they are despised and opposed by CIA and MI6 and therefore become allies. (The US organization is the "American Enforcement Agency.") In case we miss the point that the

US enforcement officers are uncultured cowboys, a senior US officer briefs the highest levels of British intelligence wearing a polo shirt. In this tale, the Bad Brits are really bad. Well beyond their usual eagerness to sacrifice the British national interest by currying favor with CIA, these Brits are criminals—completely in bed with Roper. And COS London—a virtual clone of the beautiful and treacherous COS Berlin in *A Most Wanted Man*—is part of the conspiracy.

The politics of *The Night Manager* are fairly subdued. There is a brief reference to the United States' and the United Kingdom's abandoning the nascent democrats of the Arab Spring, and Pine (a veteran of the Second Gulf War) vaguely alludes to war crimes he witnessed. The biggest departure from the le Carré template is the happy ending—Roper and his allies go to prison, and Pine ends up with Roper's beautiful mistress (events that would never happen in a le Carré novel). The fact that the villains are criminals depoliticizes the story—there are no pressing moral issues or ambiguities here.

All in all, the program is well worth watching—exotic locales, beautifully filmed; good acting; minimal political posturing; and a compelling plot. Those who insist on absolute accuracy will find plenty to criticize, but the lapses can be easily overlooked. Le Carré recently described the complete loss of creative control he endured in the making of this program, and it shows in lapses from verisimilitude,^a which include live satellite videos feeds at the push of a button on the desk of every analyst, an American infantry battalion with unilateral freedom of action at the Turkish-Syrian border (all it took was one phone call from the cowboy in the polo shirt), and export licenses listing "Sarin Gas" as part of a shipment. And when the bad Brits put Pine's case officer out of business and even confiscate her office furniture and computers, she still has the money and documentation to mount an operation in Cairo.

a. John le Carré, "They've Totally Changed My Book—But It Works," *The Guardian*, 20 February 2016.



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