

# Spy for a New Millennium

*John le Carré takes on the global financial mobsters*

**By David Ignatius**

**G**EORGE SMILEY IS BACK! THAT'S THE treasure hidden in John le Carré's newest novel. He isn't called George Smiley anymore—the author famously buried him after *The Secret Pilgrim*, supposedly because Smiley, the quintessential creature of the Cold War, had to die with the fall of the Berlin Wall. (Le Carré offered a simpler, and much funnier, explanation in a recent lecture—namely that Alec Guinness kidnapped Smiley, by playing him so brilliantly in the BBC television productions that le Carré could no longer hear his favorite character's voice, only Guinness', and had to abandon him.)

But whatever voice he's speaking, Smiley is back. His name in this book is Nat Brock, which has a crisper, TV-anchorman ring to it than Smiley, but that's part of the message—le Carré chooses his characters' names as mischievously as Dickens. And there are other obvious differences. The new Smiley doesn't read classical German, he isn't pudgy, he doesn't have a house in Bywater Street, he doesn't have a faithless wife, he isn't a member of the Oxbridge upper-middle-class. Indeed, he lacks nearly all the superficial attributes of George Smiley. He isn't even a real spy—he's a customs agent!

Still, Nat Brock has the inner qualities that defined George Smiley—and perfected the literary genre of the spy novel. He is a gray man, with a world-weariness so profound that the reader senses immediately that Brock has gazed into the very bottom of the abyss. You have the feeling with Brock, just as with Smiley, that he knows how the story will end before it begins.

And, like Smiley, Brock has the deferential personal habits that mask an awesome competence in his trade. He is the perfect British operative—his politeness and bonhomie masking an obsessive quest for

the truth. I've been convinced for many years that the central fact about the English is that they are the best liars in the world. They are raised from birth to dissemble, artfully and with self-deprecating wit. Where an American considers himself discreet if he keeps a secret for a week, the Brits take their secrets to the grave. And Brock is such a man.

Brock's enemy is a piratical gang of Russian crooks and the sleek, Turnbull-and-Asser-clad British banker, Tiger Single, who is laundering their money. Le Carré describes his villains with a reportorial precision, and the book is a veritable cookbook for money laundering—explaining how to use Swiss banks, Andorran offshore accounts, Viennese charitable foundations, and Turkish holiday villas to stash your stolen billions. It would be nice if these were purely imaginary characters, but they are emblematic of the New World Disorder—the fixers and Mafiosi who lurk in the shadows today in Russia, certainly, but also in France, China, Japan, Italy—even in merrie olde England.

Le Carré knows that choosing the right villain is the hardest part of writing a thriller these days. It used to be easy; the only question was which ruthless Communist stereotype to choose. Nobody ever found a better model than le Carré's Karla—as opaque and menacing as the system he represented. After the Cold War ended, le Carré suffered from a villain deficit, and he meandered a bit looking for the right target. To his credit, he never stooped to the Nazis, the very bottom of the thriller-writer's barrel.

But in this novel, le Carré has found precisely the right villain. The new financial mobsters really are the successors to the KGB as global enemy No. 1. They symbolize a world in which private power—the mafias, money launderers, currency speculators, and their attendant musclemen—have become more powerful and pervasive than any intelligence agency. The people who have to fight them are humble customs agents like Brock, and tax investigators, cops, and a few superannuated spies.

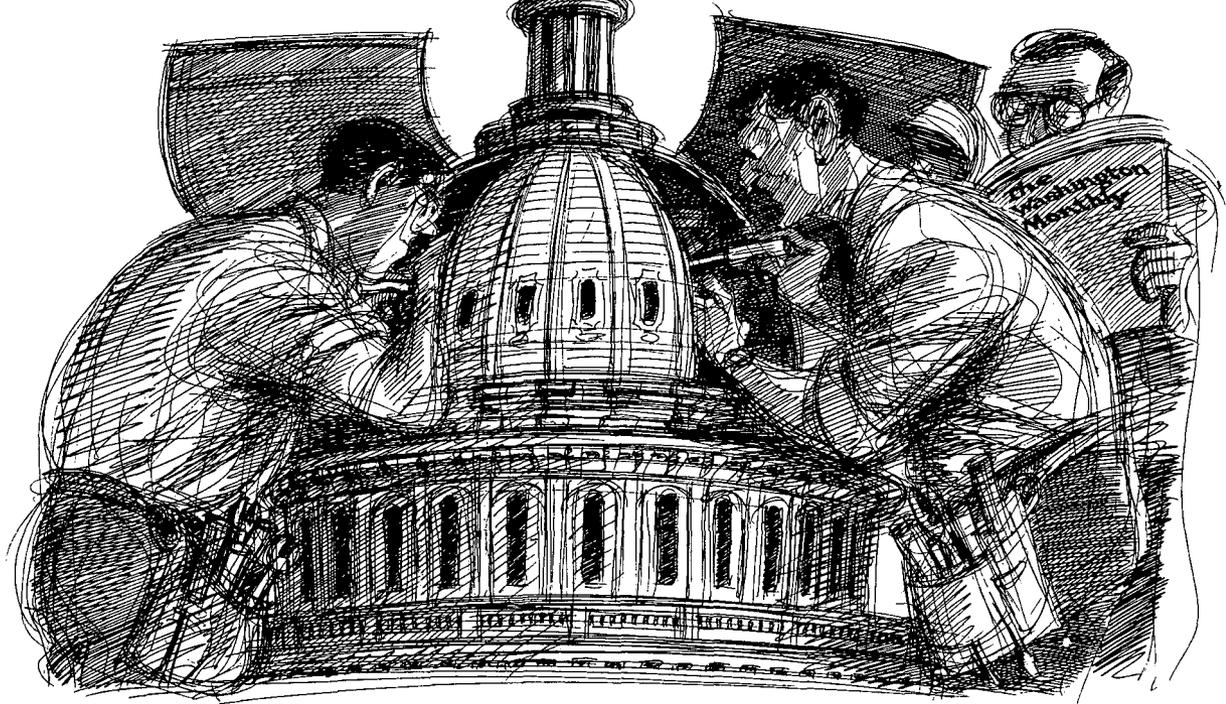
**SINGLE & SINGLE**

*By John le Carré*

Scribner, \$26

DAVID IGNATIUS is a columnist for *The Washington Post* *op-ed* page. His new novel, *The Sun King*, will be published in October by Random House.

# Capitol Repair Kit



While Washington burns with partisan rhetoric, we cool the air with clear-headed, innovative solutions to some of the nation's most unyielding problems. And we have fun doing it. **The Washington Monthly** explores the quirks, cons, and paralysis that too often underpin American politics—then we offer a sensible way out. *The New York Observer* says we are the magazine "to which anyone who gives a damn about this country must subscribe."



## SUBSCRIBE NOW AND SAVE!

YES! Enter my subscription for a full year (10 issues) to **The Washington Monthly** for only \$29.95.

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

City \_\_\_\_\_ State \_\_\_\_\_ Zip \_\_\_\_\_

Payment enclosed       Bill me later

Charge my     VISA       MasterCard

Credit Card # \_\_\_\_\_ Exp. \_\_\_\_\_

**The Washington Monthly**

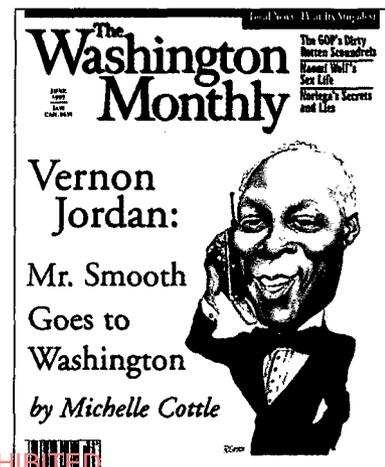
Box 587

Mount Morris, IL 61054

For Canadian and other foreign subscriptions add \$7. Please remit U.S. funds.

ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"... holds up a deadly accurate mirror to the Washington political culture, exposing its hypocrisies, stupidities, and unexpected triumphs." — Michael Beschloss



In all of these ways, *Single & Single* marks the end of the post-Cold War drift in le Carré's writing. He went through a string of books which even his most loyal fans found difficult to read. Some were intensely introspective, like *A Perfect Spy*, others were more whimsical, like *The Tailor of Panama*. This is the first le Carré novel in a while that fuses plot and character in a way reminiscent of his classics, *The Spy Who Came in From the Cold* and *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy*.

Le Carré's world remains one of moral ambiguity, colored in the inevitable shades of gray. But a clear and menacing enemy has come into sight again, and a sturdy hero has been found to do battle—and win! This isn't a book that ends with an exhausted affirmation of victory—like the bitterly ironic “Yes, well, I suppose I did” that closed *Smiley's People*. This one ends as happily and sentimentally as any le Carré novel I can remember. With helicopters and blazing guns, it's an ending even Jerry Bruckheimer would like!

There are modest problems with this novel, and they stem from the fact that le Carré is a gifted writer who doesn't simply want to write “thrillers.” He wants to write true “novels,” which examine the interior lives of his characters and reckon with the central issues that have shaped the novelist's own life. It's a version of the Woody Allen problem—for years, his fans kept saying: Stop trying to be Ingmar Bergman and go back to making funny films like “Bananas” and “Take the Money and Run.” But Woody Allen didn't want to make funny films anymore. He wanted to grow as an artist. So too with John le Carré.

Most particularly, le Carré wants to explore the tension between himself and his father, a charming con-man named Ronnie. *A Perfect Spy* told the story of a monstrously seductive father and a son's struggle to assert himself. *Single & Single* tells a similar story about a corrupt father who runs a sort of Lazard Freres of money laundering and his son Oliver, who struggles to establish his independence—first through betrayal, then through loyalty. It's a compelling thriller, but far less convincing as a novel of the inner life. The difficulty is that le Carré's attempts to fathom the interior lives of Single père et fils occasionally subvert the narrative force of the neo-spy novel he has plotted. A good “thriller” is like an arrow shot through the air. The pleasure of reading is akin to hurtling toward a target, carried by the momentum of the plot and the taut description of character and scene. Reading a “novel” is a different experience: slower, more reflective, more discursive—more like a stroll through a dense forest than an arrow's flight.

For all of le Carré's meandering discussion of the inner lives of *Single & Single*, I must say that I didn't find either character entirely believable. Much like the father and son in *A Perfect Spy*, they're picaresque—outsized, disproportionate, all sizzle and no steak. The motivations of Single Jr., in particular, are a mystery. You don't really fathom what led him to betray his Dad, any more than you understand why he risks everything to save him at the end (other than the natural human desire to help a Dad who has been beaten to a bloody pulp). The secret of le Carré's relationship with his own father remains intact, for better or worse, to explore in another book.

The plot of this book is so well-constructed that you have a sense of epiphany at the end, but no real sense of what the characters have learned about themselves through all the turbulent action. In that sense, the book has an awkward status—not quite a “novel,” not quite a “thriller.” People always say that's what they like about le Carré, but I find it an awkward mix. A book that's all one thing—like *The Spy Who Came in From the Cold*—may be better literature. I write this with some small appreciation for the dilemma le Carré faces. I've written four spy novels myself which, though hardly in a league with le Carré's work, have found a limited readership. Yet I've sometimes balked at simply writing “thrillers”—what intellectually insecure former *Washington Monthly* editor would truly aspire to be Robert Ludlum? As a result, I've sometimes clogged my books with inessential detail or “writerly” writing that subverted the arrow's flight of the plot.

When I began working on my fifth book last year, I decided to try a “novel,” with no spies, no hokey plot, no slick foreign locations cobbled together from trips to Yerevan or Tashkent or Beijing. It's called *The Sun King*, and it's a dark Washington love story about baby boomers whose reach exceeds their grasp. We'll see what critics say—probably it will be some version of: Why doesn't he make funny movies like “Bananas” anymore? But it's good to experiment—good to wander in the wilderness, as le Carré has in his recent books—looking for new stories and new ways to tell them.

Yet it's also good to go back home. The real art in *Single & Single*, for me, is not the writerly palaver about fathers and sons, but the taut, sparely written character of Nat Brock. Le Carré has found that voice again. He has located the new enemy and described him with precision. He has found a wise but wary champion—a customs agent, an economic warrior—to be a hero for our time. The post-Cold War is over. Something new and frightening is upon us. And thank heaven, George Smiley is back. ●

# Memo of the Month

## Tax Law Changes Effective for 1999

Use your 1998 tax return as a guide in figuring your 1999 estimated tax, but be sure to consider the changes noted in this section. For more information on changes that may affect your 1999 estimator, see Pub. 970.

**Modification of estimated tax safe harbor for some taxpayers.** For 1999, the estimated tax safe harbor that is based on the tax shown on your 1998 tax return is 105% of that amount if you are not a farmer or a fisherman and the adjusted gross income shown on that return is more than \$150,000 or, if married filing separately for 1999, more than \$75,000.

**Child tax credits.** For 1999, the total of the child tax credit and the additional child tax credit can be as much as \$500 for each qualifying child.

**Student loan interest deduction.** The amount you may be allowed to deduct on your tax return or interest that is paid during 1999 on a qualified student loan has been increased to \$1,000.

**IRA deduction restored for some people covered by retirement plans.** You may be able to claim an IRA deduction for 1999 if you are covered by a retirement plan and your modified AGI is less than \$41,000 if single, head of household, or married filing separately and you lived apart from your spouse for all of 1999; \$61,000 if married filing jointly or qualified widow(er).