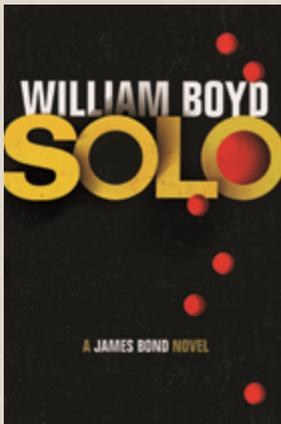


# Books

**With spies and spymasters making news headlines, Chris Green has been following two new spy novels, one giving James Bond a new assignment, the other placing the Alfred Dreyfus affair in an historical fiction**



## **Solo: A James Bond Novel**

William Boyd  
Jonathan Cape, 2013

Spies are in the news. As I write, Julian Assange is still holed up in the Ecuadorian embassy and our chief spymasters have been angrily denouncing Edward Snowden in parliament. An Economist advert on the tube today asked me which side I was on: liberty or security, terrorist or watcher. Welcome, then, two of the most famous fictional spies, in the hands of two superbly competent authors.

Poor James Bond. He's not only had to battle Blofeld, Dr No and Scaramanga, he's had to contend with Roger Moore, political correctness and being sent up rotten by Austin Powers. That the man has preserved any dignity at all shows the strength of the central idea. That, and a good tailor.

Let's start with what *Solo* is not – it's not a movie. The formulaic films ran out of Fleming material decades

ago, and so they commissioned new stories. Similarly, Ian Fleming's estate have kept the novels alive by commissioning other writers to tackle them, independently of the needs of cinema. Kingsley Amis, Jeffrey Deaver and Sebastian Faulkes have each had a go, all better writers than Fleming himself, but were unable to escape parody, which Fleming himself never drifted into.

The latest resurrection comes from William Boyd, among our cleverest writers. One of his novels, *Any Human Heart*, has a fictionalised appearance by Ian Fleming, so Boyd is on familiar ground here. And he achieves his task well: this is authentic 1960s London, with Old Spice and Aertex shirts, and the genuine Bond, with his trademark navy tie and appetites for life (there's a cheeky footnote on page 269 giving Bond's preferred recipe for vinaigrette

dressing). And, subtly, Boyd moves the moral goal posts to match our day. There's sex without the sexism, product placement without the snobbery, violence without the sadism, and Africa without the racism.

Africa is home territory for some of Boyd's best novels, so when he makes West Africa the plot-turner, it is a frighteningly plausible context. An international grab for oil (think Nigeria) combines with a famine (think Biafra) and civil war (think DRC) to produce a complex and nasty setting called Zanzarim, home to some unpleasant villains and surprising twists.

Formulaic? Maybe – but Bond himself isn't. This Double-o agent is moved by starving children, revolted by violence and driven by revenge at needless murder. He has literary tastes: his chosen reading for the journey to Zanzarim is Graham Greene's *The Heart of the Matter*. At times it feels

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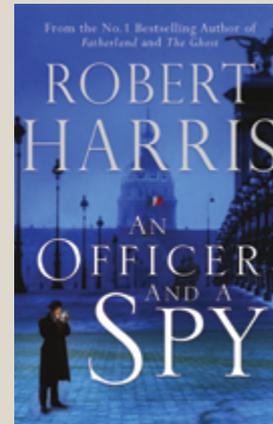
like he might have read *Heart of Darkness* too.

So this clever little novel (did you notice the title? Solo. Double-O, but on his own) achieves its end, of producing a 1960s Bond for 2013. It is tissue-thin with hardly an idea in its sights other than the brilliance of its conceit at giving you vicarious fun, and it does so with the satisfyingly expensive growl of Bond's Jensen Interceptor. Graham Greene distinguished his novels from his 'entertainments'. *Solo* is also an entertainment, and none the worse for that.

It's also a grown-up, secular novel (let the reader understand). The script is that this is an ugly and violent world, where force is to be met with force and pleasures taken where they can. The classic three temptations of money, sex and power are on full display throughout the whole – in fact, they are probably the engine that drives the entire Bond franchise. At least *Solo* manages it with style. But this is not a 'helpful' or 'encouraging' book.

It is, though, informative, because Boyd shows how some once-tolerated habits have become unacceptable, while others (the drink, the gambling) remain. Some things that were 'good' are now 'bad', but other values are unchanged.

That's probably the dilemma the gospel pierces into most clearly: there are goodies and baddies, but a shifting moral context. So how do you know which is which? In a secular Darwinian context, why shouldn't the riches,



## **An Officer and a Spy**

Robert Harris  
Hutchinson, 2013

the girls, the toys, go to the most successfully violent, rather than the most morally upright?

Turn those questions of morality to the other fictional spy, Alfred Dreyfus. He is most certainly not a fictional character. He lived from 1859 to 1935 and at the peak of his early military career was an artillery officer in the French Army, a brilliant student who had a glittering career ahead of him. He died a lieutenant colonel, having fought in the First World War (at Verdun), and having been made an *officier de la Légion d'honneur*.

Why do I call this man a fictional spy, then? Because in 1894 he was arrested, tried in secret against evidence unknown to him, convicted and sentenced to life imprisonment

on Devil's Island in French Guyana, in conditions of increasing sadism. His crime was passing military secrets to a foreign power.

No, that's not right. His crime was that he was a Jew. Dreyfus was made to carry the indignity and blame of entirely trumped-up charges, of which another man was guilty, on a wave of public and private antisemitism that still causes pain in France today. His degradation (a military ceremony in which his uniform was ripped and his sword snapped, and in which he was marched around the sneering, spitting army) was carried out in the centre of Paris, in front of tens of thousands who loathed him. 'Death to the Jew.'

The Dreyfus affair, as it became known, came about because odd pieces of the evidence seeming to convict him kept falling apart, and a group of brave public figures (most prominently the novelist Emile Zola) took on the entire military establishment in a determination to prove that Dreyfus was innocent, the trial corrupt, and that the judgment needed to be reversed.

It took years for this to happen, for a large part of which Dreyfus himself was in complete ignorance of the efforts, since he had been left to die on a tropical rock. It's been said that the Dreyfus affair is the greatest act of injustice that a Western court has ever been party to. And that's saying something.

Robert Harris is one of our best thriller writers. Not as fine a novelist

as William Boyd, perhaps, but I still buy every one he produces. His particular angle is the historical what-if. What if Hitler had won the war? What if Stalin had had a surviving son? What if computers were powerful enough to run the world economy unaided? What if Cherie Blair... no, I won't spoil that one for you. He understands politics, power, tension.

He has put all these skills to work to make us aware of the Dreyfus affair, which he writes as if it were fiction, but without changing the plot. This is meticulously researched history (which he does with his series of Cicero novels too), but written with page-turning brio. I finished the book furious at the antisemitism of France in the 19th century, in awe of Dreyfus' dignity (although Harris correctly portrays him as irritating, pushy and pompous as well), and admiring the courage and persistence of the small band of *Dreyfusards* who pressed for his acquittal.

We can learn significant things here. We can learn that antisemitism in Europe was never limited to Germany in the 1930s but had run across all sections of society and across national boundaries for many decades. Grasping antisemitism in general is necessary to understand the European 20th century, and the Dreyfus affair is still necessary to understand France. We also need Dreyfus to understand Zola and Proust.

Above all, though, I noticed Harris's passion. He, like his non-fictional hero,

Georges Picquart, is deeply convinced of Dreyfus's innocence and of the wrongness of the trial, the evidence, the process and the verdict. I imagine he wants us to be equally passionate about injustice today. He has fictionalised those true issues, just as Boyd fictionalised the evils of famine, murder, greed and revenge. Both are morally serious books, even while they entertain superbly.

So what I take away is that in another secular book (explicitly so – Picquart's mother died a Catholic, but Picquart himself was an atheist) there is a deep understanding of right and wrong, truth and lies, innocence and guilt, justice and miscarriage of justice. Even in the shifting shadows of the world of spies.

Our non-Christian friends will be increasingly sceptical of absolute truth, or even the possibility of any truth at all. Do you believe the CIA, Assange, Snowden, or MI5? And if you don't believe MI5, why should you believe Bond?

Do them a favour. If your friends would never come to church and never read a Christian book, buy them *An Officer and a Spy* for a present. And when they've read it, start talking about justice and innocence, truth and guilt. If you can't get from the gospel from there, and a crowd baying for the blood of an innocent Jew, you're probably in the wrong job.

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