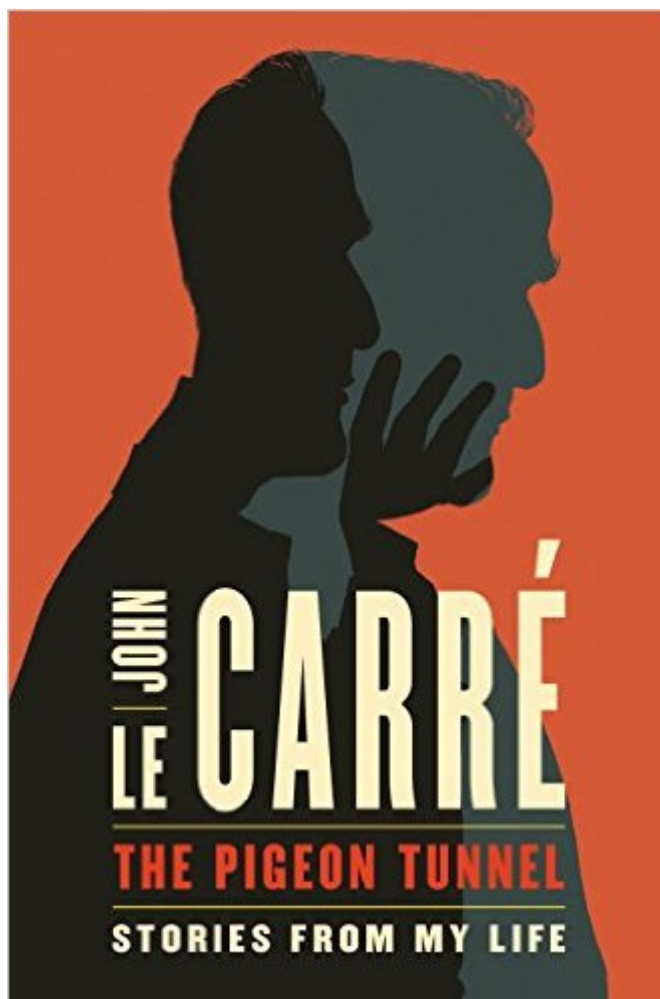


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# The Pigeon Tunnel: Stories From My Life



## Synopsis

“Recounted with the storytelling élan of a master raconteur” by turns dramatic and funny, charming, tart and melancholy. —Michiko Kakutani, *The New York Times*

The first memoir from John le Carré, the legendary bestselling author of *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy*; *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold*; and *The Night Manager*, now a television series starring Tom Hiddleston. From his years serving in British Intelligence during the Cold War, to a career as a writer that took him from war-torn Cambodia to Beirut on the cusp of the 1982 Israeli invasion to Russia before and after the collapse of the Berlin Wall, le Carré has always written from the heart of modern times. In this, his first memoir, le Carré is as funny as he is incisive, reading into the events he witnesses the same moral ambiguity with which he imbues his novels. Whether he’s writing about the parrot at a Beirut hotel that could perfectly mimic machine gun fire or the opening bars of Beethoven’s Fifth; visiting Rwanda’s museums of the unburied dead in the aftermath of the genocide; celebrating New Year’s Eve 1982 with Yasser Arafat and his high command; interviewing a German woman terrorist in her desert prison in the Negev; listening to the wisdoms of the great physicist, dissident, and Nobel Prize winner Andrei Sakharov; meeting with two former heads of the KGB; watching Alec Guinness prepare for his role as George Smiley in the legendary BBC TV adaptations of *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy* and *Smiley’s People*; or describing the female aid worker who inspired the main character in *The Constant Gardener*, le Carré endows each happening with vividness and humor, now making us laugh out loud, now inviting us to think anew about events and people we believed we understood. Best of all, le Carré gives us a glimpse of a writer’s journey over more than six decades, and his own hunt for the human spark that has given so much life and heart to his fictional characters.

## Book Information

Hardcover: 320 pages

Publisher: Viking (September 6, 2016)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0735220778

ISBN-13: 978-0735220775

Product Dimensions: 6.4 x 1.1 x 9.3 inches

Shipping Weight: 12 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 5.0 out of 5 stars — See all reviews (3 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #636 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #3 in Books > Politics & Social

Sciences > Politics & Government > Specific Topics > Intelligence & Espionage #5 inÂ Books > Biographies & Memoirs > Arts & Literature > Authors #8 inÂ Books > Biographies & Memoirs > Leaders & Notable People > Political

## Customer Reviews

John le Carr  has described himself as a liar: "Born to lying, bred to it, trained to it by an industry that lies for a living, practiced in it as a novelist." I'm a huge fan. But those lines about lying? Too clever by half. Fiction is how we tell stories we couldn't accept as non-fiction, because a reader would say there's just no way that life happens like that. For example, who is more honorable, the king of Russian money-launderers or a London banker? The correct answer, based on evidence from the 2008 banking crisis, might well be the Russian. You'd never buy that. But in "Our Kind of Traitor" No problem. In "The Pigeon Tunnel: Stories from My Life," le Carr  drops the veil and delivers true stories a set of reminiscences that are pointed and concise and, in that way, better than a memoir. If you're not a reader of the novels, this may not be of great interest. If you like spy stories and believe le Carr  is the Shakespeare of that genre, this book is a major event. Consider the stories he tells: Beirut, 1982, just before the Israeli invasion, with a parrot at a hotel that could deliver the start of Beethoven's Fifth; Russia, just before the Berlin Wall falls; Alec Guinness prepares to play George Smiley; Rwanda, and its museum of the dead; Yasser Arafat on New Year's Eve, 1982; a meeting with Nobel Prize winner Andrei Sakharov, and his enigmatic smile. The best of the stories are the ones you least expect: accounts of his parents. His mother left the family when he was 5 and didn't resurface until he was 21: "I advanced down No 1 platform at Ipswich railway station for our great reunion after 16 hugless years, I could not work out for the life of me where to grab hold of her. She was as tall as I remembered, but all elbow and no huggable contours.... From the day of our reunion until she died, the frozen child in me showed not the smallest sign of thawing out. He [Ronnie, his father] was always there, which I can't say for my mother because to this day I have no idea what sort of person she was.... It was Ronnie who did the hugging, never Olive. She was the mother who had no smell whereas Ronnie smelled of fine cigars and pear-droppy hair oil from Taylor of Old Bond Street, the court hairdressers." Which is not to say his father was a prize: "Ronnie's life was spent walking on the thinnest, slipperiest layer of ice you can imagine. He saw no paradox between being on the wanted list for fraud and sporting a grey topper in the owner's enclosure at Ascot." It follows that le Carr  is hard on himself: "Is there really a big difference, I wonder, between the man who sits at his desk and dreams

up scams on the blank page (me), and the man who puts on a clean shirt every morning and, with nothing in his pocket but imagination, sallies forth to con his victim (Ronnie)?" A rhetorical question. There's a huge difference between a shelf of great books.

While it is noted that the wonderfully engrossing *The Pigeon Tunnel* is billed as the story of John le Carré's life or a memoir in actuality it is more a series of autobiographical reminiscences re the author's writing career. And a delicious read it is! Le Carré plays straight with us by initially declaring that he isn't going to discuss his personal life or his actual spy work. Not to worry - there is an abundance of fascinating material, so much so that the 11 hours and 30 minutes fly by leaving us wishing for more. Of course, frosting on the cake is to hear these memories remembered in le Carré's own voice. As most know le Carré who is David Cornwell in private life was once a British Intelligence officer who chose a pen name in order to write thrillers in his spare time. The astounding worldwide success of his first, *The Spy Who Came In From the Cold*, enabled him to write full-time. And we are the beneficiaries - who could forget *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy*, *The Little Drummer Girl* or *A Perfect Spy*? Now with *The Pigeon Tunnel* we are privy to how his unforgettable characters were created. He writes with modesty, flair and humor whether he's telling us about a parrot at a Beirut hotel that could precisely mimic machine gun fire or recounting his experience going into the Far East and Southeast Asia to do research on The Honorable Schoolboy. There are a myriad of stories about real-life folk with whom le Carré crossed paths - everyone from Yasser Arafat to Alec Guinness (who brought the author's George Smiley to vivid life), scientist Andrei Sakharov, film directors Fritz Lang, Stanley Kubrick, Richard Burton and more. Each recollection is both captivating and revealing. Listening to *The Pigeon Tunnel* is a bit like being in a room with one of the world's greatest writers and hearing him reminisce. What a pleasure, what a privilege! Enjoy!

I'm not sure anyone under fifty, even LeCarré fans, will appreciate this amazing collection of vignettes. Two things stand out: first, this man has been a true witness to the makings of modern history and second, his life has been an adventure to match any he describes herein. While much of his success (in life in general) has been the result of putting a powerful intellect to work in a way that we all benefit, it is also due to his curiosity and willingness to go see for himself, no matter where his current quest may take him. He constantly refers to himself as a novelist and that he is, but he is also a first rate journalist whose historical reportage is nonpareil. Personally, I found this book answered many of the questions that I would have while reading his novels. Whether inadvertently

(doubtful) or intentionally, this book provides many aha! keys to his collected works. If you like LeCarre, this quick read will make your day!

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