the daily Collegian arts

'Schoolboy' is a prime example of today's declining spy stories

By TOM MARCINKO
For The Daily Collegian

"The Honourable Schoolboy" by John le Carre, Knopf, $10.95, 533 pages.

Like its close cousin, the Washington political novel, the spy novel has been going downhill lately. It's easy to see why, in a world where political hacks become literary ones. Why read a Fletcher Knebel novel about a president cracking up when the real thing was a news story?

Something like that has been happening to the spy story. Spies used to be the good guys but James Bond died somewhere between the Bay of Pigs invasion and Watergate. Secret agents aren't heroes anymore unless they're made camp.

All of which has something to do with John le Carre's latest, **"The Honourable Schoolboy."** Since his third book, "The Spy Who Came in from the Cold," le Carre has received deserved praise for presenting the world of espionage as it really is. (He spent five years in the British Foreign Serivce.) His heroes aren't heroes at all; at best they're morally grey.

The new novel picks up where the last, "Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy" left off, though it can be read on its own. "Tinker" ended with the discovery that the Russians had slipped an infiltrator into the British Secret Service. "Schoolboy" deals with the service's striking back.

"Only George Smiley," says a character in the book, "could have got himself appointed captain of a wrecked ship." It's up to Smiley to restore the morale of his organization, and to recover his own self-respect. Revenge takes on a personal form for him, so personal that he is cautioned to think of his enemy as "Moscow" rather than as Karla, his opposite number in the Kremlin.

bestseller

Illustration by Valerie Marzani

He enlists the aid of Jerry Westerby, the fallen aristocrat-turned-reporter of the title. Jerry doesn't care much for politics. He comforts hard-liner Smiley by telling him, "Tell me the shots, I'll play them. World's chock-a-block with milk-and-water intellectuals armed with 15 conflicting arguments against blowing their blasted noses. We don't need another. Okay? I mean, Christ."

Westerby never questions the reasons for his actions, and this is the novel's major point. It's all very easy for Smiley to sit behind a desk and relish revenge on a man he's never met.

His chief storytelling virtues come into play when Westerby goes to work trailing an Oriental businessman with the unlikely name of Drake Ko (who has no loyalties to anybody but "Chiang-mao Shek"). The plot is super-convoluted, full of the minutae of spying and includes well-drawn major and minor characters. The settings, especially Vietnam during the Communist takeover (or liberation, depending on your leanings) are especially convincing, probably because le Carre has been there.

For better or worse, and I think it's for the worse. The spy story is nearly dead as an escapist genre. Le Carre's novel is entertaining, but it's too realistic to give you a vacation from the real world. I for one can't read James Bond or watch "Mission: Impossible" reruns without wondering what the CIA was up to when people were enjoying those books and that program in the 60s.

Le Carre makes me wonder what they're up to now.

Funny flick has Burns as Deity

By JOHN WARD
Daily Collegian Staff Writer

It's been very slim pickings for movie comedies this year. 1977 began promisingly with "Fun with Dick and Jane" and, of course, "Annie Hall." But the rest of the year has been a vast wasteland. Until now, with the arrival of "Oh, God!"

The film, now playing at the State, is a nice, light comedy, directed in a relaxed style by Carl Reiner and acted with surprising ease by George Burns and John Denver.

Denver is making his feature film debut with "Oh, God!," and he does very well in the role of an assistant supermarket manager who becomes God's messenger.

Burns plays God in human form. It's simply another example of Reiner's wit that Burns appears before Denver wearing a golf cap, windbreaker and sneakers.

The basic plotline of the movie involves Denver coming to believe that Burns is really God, then trying to convince other people of the fact as well. Denver's impossible task becomes the springboard for most of the film's humor.

The humor itself runs from sight gags to one-liners, most of which belong to Burns. One example involves Burns answering a long list of questions and Denver writing them down. Burns: "Last question."

Denver: "Thank God."

Burns: "You're welcome."

To be honest, the film is so sugary-sweet that it could have been made for television. Burns and Denver, throughout the movie, are the chief proponents of this "sweetness and light" deal. Outside of this fact, any other kind of criticism would be called nitpicking.

The supporting cast is great, with some excellent comedy credentials to back them up. Teri Garr, who was memorable as the laboratory assistant to Gene Wilder in "Young Frankenstein," plays Denver's wife with a distinct edge of embarrassment and disbelief.

Illustration by Mark VanDine

Paul Sorvino has the funniest role in the film, that of a fire-and-brimstone evangelist who holds a different view of God than Denver. Sorvino really hams it up for the audience, especially during his revival scene. With a bit of luck, he could end up with a supporting Oscar nomination.

When Denver calls Sorvino a liar in public, Sorvino takes him to court, setting up the climactic courtroom scene. It's a scene straight out of "Miracle on 34th Street;" only this time it's God, not Santa Claus, who must prove his existence.

Considering the quality and quantity of today's movie comedies (Mel Brooks and Woody Allen are the only consistent sources), "Oh, God!" is one hell of a good movie.

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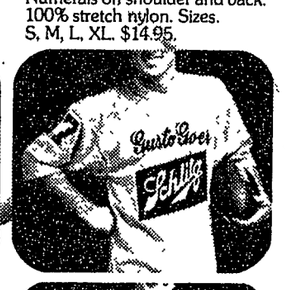

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