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## CRITICAL HISTORY

 QUESTION

One critic has asked 'Precisely how tragic, and how comic, is all this supposed to be?' To what extent can *Spies* be called either comic or tragic?

## CONTEXT

The study of knowledge is a branch of philosophy called epistemology. In Plato's *Theaetetus*, Socrates sets out several possible definitions of knowledge. That which has been most influential, and widely accepted until it was contested in the 1960s, is that knowledge is a 'justified true belief'.

*Spies* is a recent novel (2002) and there has not been time for a body of critical discussion to have built up around it. However, it was reviewed extensively when it was published, providing a source of direct comment on the themes, structure and success of the novel.

Reviewers have noted the interest in memory and imagination which Frayn develops in the novel, and looked at the narratorial voice and the stance the **narrator** takes in relation to Stephen. There is general agreement that Frayn recreates the perspective of a young boy convincingly. There is less agreement over how well he paces the story and whether the ending is a masterstroke or something of a disappointment.

Adam Mars-Jones, reviewing *Spies* in *The Observer*, comments on how Frayn sets up two perspectives within the novel – that of Stefan and of Stephen – and then deliberately fails to deliver the insights an older narrator could give. 'This can seem a rather perverse piece of construction, setting up a double perspective and then muffling it, but its great virtue is that it shuts out whimsy' ('Spies like us', *The Observer*, 10 February 2002). He points out that it allows Stefan to 'fret over' the past 'without claiming authority over it'. At the same time, it allows Frayn to recreate and respect Stephen's point of view without being limited by it. Hugo Barnacle, writing in the *New Statesman* (4 February 2002), finds the double perspective unconvincing: 'One can see the double-vision effect Frayn is trying for, but it doesn't quite come off.' He also feels that the novel 'suffers from a major drawback in the area of plausibility'.

Mars-Jones finds Frayn's forays into **epistemology** unconvincing and unsatisfying – he calls them 'strained passages, ponderings with a whiff of the seminar, rather too methodical for the context'. In particular, he thinks the ending, which strays into mysticism, is unjustified in a story 'in which individual patches of knowledge and ignorance are fitted into a fully coherent pattern. In fact, the whole underlying principle of the book's construction is that there is no such single thing as knowing, an on/off state like a light switch.'

John Lanchester describes the novel as 'a study of the difference between what we think we know and what is real, and also of the difference between what we really know and what we are prepared to admit' (*New York Review of Books*, June 2002).

Peter Bradshaw ('Children's crusade', *The Guardian*, 9 February 2002) is one of the few critics who find the ending of *Spies* wholly satisfactory, comparing the last fifty pages to pulling back the joystick in a plane like Uncle Peter's to soar into literary acrobatics. Even so, he calls it 'curious' that Frayn spends so long at a sauntering pace setting up the novel before this rapid and showy **denouement**. Paul Bailey ('Lost in the smoke of wartime memories', *The Independent*, 16 February 2002) finds it 'deftly plotted' but that there 'are almost too many revelations in the final pages'. John Updike, too, feels that 'slightly too much seems to happen toward the end, abetted by too many artfully delayed recognitions' ('Absent presences', *New Yorker*, 1 April 2002). Max Watman finds it even less satisfactory, particularly in that we have to wait so long for information which Stefan had in his possession at the start: 'The unnecessary and empty suspense can't jibe with Frayn's insistence that the book be cast as a recollection. The same is true for the willful naïveté of the child narrator. If we are not to benefit from the older man's perspective until the last dozen or so pages, why introduce him at the start?' ('Guileless games', *New Criterion*, May 2002). Michiko Kakutani is similarly unimpressed by Frayn's 'coy refusal' to reveal facts which Stefan has at his fingertips from the beginning. He finds the book ending on 'a decidedly unconvincing note' that feels 'contrived' and 'ham-handed'. It is, he says, a 'hokey, expository conclusion' that undermines our trust in the narration ('That nice lady up the road. A spy?', *New York Times*, 9 April 2002).

## SPIES AND CRITICAL MOVEMENTS

The main movements in critical theory during the course of the twentieth century have been from **modernism** to **postmodernism**, incorporating **structuralism**, **post-structuralism** and **deconstructionist** theory. Parts of the postmodernist movement,

 QUESTION

Do you find the ending of *Spies* satisfactory? How well do you think it works in terms of the pace and progression of the rest of the novel?

World events

**1914–18** First World War

**1919** Treaty of Versailles establishes the grounds of peace after the First World War, limiting German military powers

**1921** Adolf Hitler becomes leader of the National Socialist German Workers' Party

**1933** Adolf Hitler becomes Chancellor of Germany and, soon after, dictator; first concentration camps open at Dachau, Buchenwald, Sachsenhausen and Ravensbrück to receive Jews; persecution of Jews begins as Nazis boycott Jewish shops and businesses, strip Jewish immigrants from Poland of German nationality and define Jews as 'non-Aryan'; Jews prohibited from owning land or editing newspapers

Author's life

**1933** (8 September) Born in Mill Hill in London, England

Literary events

**1908** First issue of the boys' magazine *The Magnet*; the magazine featured the Billy Bunter stories

**1922** Publication of *Just William*, the first story about the character William Brown by Richmal Crompton (1890–1969)

**1932** Publication of the first Biggles story in *Popular Flying* magazine; publication of the first book of Biggles stories, *The Camels are Coming*, by W. E. Johns (1893–1968)

World events

**1934** Hitler becomes Führer on the death of German President Paul von Hindenberg

**1935** Nuremberg race laws against Jews declared, making it illegal for Jews to marry Aryan Germans and stripping Jews of their German citizenship

**1938** Jews have to register land, property and businesses

**1939** Curfew imposed on Jews; outbreak of the Second World War

**1940** Start of deportation of German Jews to Poland

**1941** Mass deportation of German Jews; beginning of mass killing of Jews in the 'Final Solution'

**1945** End of Second World War; liberation of concentration camps; start of Nuremberg Trials to try Nazi war criminals; foundation of the Welfare State in Britain, resumption of house building

**1948** Founding of the state of Israel; disappearance of the state of Palestine

Author's life

**1946–51** Kingston Grammar School, London

Literary events

**1940** Last issue of *The Magnet*

**1942** Publication of the first Famous Five novel, *Five on a Treasure Island*, by Enid Blyton (1897–1968)