

Prize-winner: David Cornwell alias John le Carré, British writer

David Cornwell, alias John le Carré, is the master of the political and psychological crime novel. In his numerous spy thrillers, which have achieved success worldwide, he condensed Germany's difficult role during the era of the Cold War in his writing. le Carré has always been convinced that language learning is the key to understanding foreign cultures - his life's work and his love of the German language is an impressive example of this.

John le Carré wrote his novels in the second half of the twentieth century. They reflect the global lines of political conflict from the Cold War era to the present day – and his particular relationship with the German language and culture. Great Britain's most famous German-speaker once said: "He [his German teacher] said that the love we have for other languages intensifies and explains the love we have for our own. He might even have said, with Charlemagne, that to possess another language is to possess another soul." (Think German Conference, 2010). Viewing language and knowledge of a country as a prerequisite for penetrating world history and understanding ideologies, religions and peoples – these are the aspects that characterize the life's work of John le Carré. For millions of readers, he vividly brings to life the global fields of conflict.

50 years after the Berlin Wall was built, 20 years after the end of the Soviet Union and ten years after the terrorist attacks of 11 September – there could be no better moment than this to pay tribute to this extraordinary achievement of John le Carré with the Goethe Medal.

John le Carré was born in Dorset, in the south-west of England, in 1931. He grew up in difficult family circumstances, something he describes in "A Perfect Spy", the autobiographical novel he published in 1986. He left school at the age of 16 and set off to Bern in Switzerland to study modern languages and German. Just four years after the end of the Second World War, he determined that Germany, the "rogue elephant in the drawing room", was "worth examining". He initially continued his intensive engagement with German language and culture at the University of Oxford, and from 1956 to 1958 as a teacher at Eton College. Following a period spent in Vienna, his career took him to the third German-speaking country in Europe: from 1959, he worked at the British Embassy in Bonn – and as an agent for the British secret service. After his first two novels, published in 1960 and 1962, his 1963 spy thriller "The Spy Who Came in from the Cold" achieved global success, as did the film adaptation starring Richard Burton. Now financially independent, John le Carré concentrated entirely on his writing from that point on. His novels, whose themes revolve around the contrasts between East and West and the Cold War, captivate the reader with their painstaking psychological depiction of the characters and their wealth of historical details – le Carré broke with stereotypical viewpoints and criticized the betrayal of western ideals.

Following the end of the Cold War, he devoted himself to new fields such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the struggle for freedom of the peoples of the Caucasus and the enmeshment of politics with the weapons and drugs trade.

le Carré highlights the criminal practices of globally active pharmaceutical corporations in his novel "The Constant Gardener". John le Carré's political involvement goes beyond merely his literary work, however – he repeatedly adopts a public and critical stance on the politics of the West, especially the British-American anti-terror coalition in the wake of the attacks of 11 September. This is a subject which he raises in his novel "A Most Wanted Man", which was published in 2008. This "literary masterpiece" (DIE ZEIT 2008) is set in Hamburg and explores the West's fear of terrorist attacks. His most recent novel came out in 2010: "Our Kind of Traitor". In his 23 novels, John le Carré has succeeded in producing "great humanistic literature from a worn-out genre" (Der Spiegel 2006). John le Carré now lives in Cornwall.

Quotations from John le Carré

"Perhaps my usefulness this morning is that I am what in German is called *freistehend*, meaning I represent no institution or country, and can therefore make a fool of myself alone. And that's a privilege that I owe quite largely to the fact that, at the age of sixteen, I decided that eleven years' hard labour in the English boarding-school gulag was enough for anyone, and in 1949 – only four years then after the war's end – I bolted to Bern in Switzerland, determined to embrace the German soul."

From his keynote speech at the Think German Conference in June 2010

„[F]or most of my conscious childhood Germany had been the rogue elephant in the drawing room. Germans were murderous fellows. They had bombed one of my schools (which I did not entirely take amiss); they had bombed my grandparents' tennis court, which was very serious, and I was terrified of them. But in my rebellious adolescent state, a country that had been so thoroughly bad was also by definition worth examining. Also, one of the few things I had enjoyed about my schooling had been the German language, with which my tongue had formed a natural, friendly relationship."

From his keynote speech at the Think German Conference in June 2010

"Germany and Britain today have nothing to fear from one another, and much to learn, and now is the time to learn it."

From his keynote speech at the Think German Conference in June 2010

Quotations about John le Carré

"Le Carré is not simply a thriller author like any other. While he may be a master of tension, driving the reader breathlessly through novels, however long they may be, he also shines with linguistic elegance and a complexity of characterization of which many "serious" authors could well be envious."

SZ newspaper, 19 October 2006

“No writer has so concisely captured this [Germany’s] idiosyncratic blend of provincialism and world stage, of marginalization and centrality, as the English thriller author John le Carré (...) He has evoked the Germany of the Cold War in his narratives. [...] John le Carré had a sense like no-one else for the pathos and introspective nature of the political situation of the two Germanys.”

Ijoma Mangold on 24 November 2008 in the SZ newspaper

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