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Dare to Know

Spy Fiction

Fiction that depicts the clandestine world of espionage and secret agents.

A genre in which international intelligence-gathering is the focal point of the plot. These culturally and politically charged stories are often set during World War I, World War II, the Cold War, and the War Against Terrorism. They follow spies and saboteurs, usually working for a real or fictional government agency, as they complete their missions to defeat foreign powers or arch-villains planning global domination. Spy hunters and counter-intelligence operatives are likewise occupied with countering the activities of enemy infiltrators in the homeland. Operating in a nebulous reality of moral uncertainty, characters encounter smugglers, arms dealers, racketeers, rival agents, and terrorists. Protagonists are sometimes depicted as world weary, trapped between ethics and duty or betrayed from within by the organizations that once trained and sanctioned them. They have discovered that colleagues and counterparts in the profession, both men and women alike, are dreadful, and that life offers few prospects for them. Stories may question the authority and morality of the political and bureaucratic forces that direct the spies as much as focusing on those whom the protagonists oppose. Often, the agent goes rogue to uncover traitors inside his or her organization, and there is some focus on the protagonist's psychological state. This genre sometimes merges with **action and adventure fiction, mystery and detective fiction, and thrillers**. James Fenimore Cooper's *The Spy* (1821), Arthur Conan Doyle's "The Adventure of the Naval Treaty" (1893), Rudyard Kipling's *Kim* (1901), Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent* (1907), John Buchan's *The Thirty-Nine Steps* (1915), Gaston Leroux's *Rouletabille chez Krupp* (1917), W. Somerset Maugham's *Ashenden* (1928), Eric Ambler's *The Dark Frontier* (1936), Helen MacInnes's *Above Suspicion* (1939), E. Howard Hunt's *East of Farewell* (1943), Carmichael Smith's *Atomsk* (1949), Ian Fleming's *Casino Royale* (1953), Graham Greene's *Our Man in Havana* (1958), William J. Lederer and Egene Burdick's *The Ugly American* (1958), Alistair MacLean's *The Last Frontier* (1959), John Le Carré's *Call for the Dead* (1961) and *The Spy Who Came In from the Cold* (1963), Len Deighton's *The Ipcress File* (1962), Adam Hall's *The Quiller Memorandum* (1965), and William Garner's *Overkill* (1966) are groundbreaking examples of this genre.

Common Elements

Shadowy world behind the headlines
Political and economic espionage
Sabotage and "dirty tricks"
Conspiracies
Paranoia

Guilt
Deception
Moral ambiguity
Propaganda and counterpropaganda
Charming secret agents
Assassinations
Shifting alliances

Rivalries and intrigues between world powers
Government corruption
Rogue states
Global terrorist networks
International criminal syndicates

Benefits of Reading

Allows readers to consider their own ability to assess people, situations, and environments through information collection and direct observation
Permits readers to vicariously experience the dangers, stresses, fears, and exhilarations of the spy trade

Demonstrates to readers the virtues of loyalty and duty
Provides readers with cautionary tales on the perils of duplicity and treachery
Enables readers to ponder the importance of truth

Modern Literary Examples

<i>Agents of Innocence</i> (1997) by David Ignatius
<i>American Spy</i> (2018) by Lauren Wilkinson
<i>The Bourne Identity</i> (1980) by Robert Ludlum
<i>Centrifuge</i> (1985) by J. C. Pollock
<i>Dark Rising</i> (2011) by Greg Beck
<i>Eye of the Needle</i> (1978) by Ken Follet
<i>The Faithful Spy</i> (2006) by Alex Berenson
<i>Firefox</i> (1977) by Craig Thomas
<i>Goering's List</i> (1993) by J. C. Pollock
<i>The Gun Seller</i> (1996) by Hugh Laurie
<i>Harlot's Ghost</i> (1991) by Norman Mailer
<i>License Renewed</i> (1981) by John Gardner
<i>The Miernik Dossier</i> (1973) by Charles McCarry

<i>The Scarlatti Inheritance</i> (1971) by Robert Ludlum
<i>Saving the Queen</i> (1976) by William F. Buckley
<i>The Spy Who Never Was</i> (1982) by Shelia Martin
<i>The Talbot Odyssey</i> (1984) by Nelson DeMille
<i>Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy</i> (1974) by John le Carré
<i>The Unlikely Spy</i> (1996) by Daniel Silva
<i>Vagabond</i> (2016) by Gerald Seymour
<i>Zero Minus Ten</i> (1997) by Raymond Benson
<i>Zoo Station</i> (2007) by David Downing