



Issue 5
Like a worm in the bud



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Colophon

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Acknowledgement of Country

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Transcript Episode 5 Season 2

Introduction

David:

Hello and welcome to episode five of our podcast Two Chairs Talking. My name is David Grigg and I'm one of the talking chairs. I'm here with my good friend Perry Middlemiss who's the other talking chair. How are you Perry?

Perry:

Pretty well at the moment actually, other than a little bit of an eyelash problem but when you get down to that level if you're only worrying about whether an eyelash is causing a bit of a problem in the eye I think you're probably doing okay.

David:

...you're doing pretty well at our age.

Perry:

In the scale of the universe it's fairly low down on the list I think, so I don't really think we need to worry about that one terribly much but otherwise I'm doing well and you are?

David:

Oh yeah pretty well. Not doing very much apart from singing in various things of course¹.

Perry:

Well it's coming into winter now, so time to be sitting inside reading books and watching movies on streaming services or taking a wander down to the local cinema and seeing something down there.

David:

Yeah well I've started [doing] that. I think I mentioned last time I've started to see a couple of things so I'm going to see the latest *Mission Impossible* tomorrow actually.

Perry:

Yes well we'll talk about that a bit later on in this episode but are you finding problems with the hearing because I know that you found that a lot of times the cinemas were either too loud or too soft or you couldn't make out the voices. So how's that going?

David:

Well there's a cunning device that you can hire. Well not hire, actually, it is part of the ticket price. Village Cinemas have this thing called Capti-View I think, something like that, and you [book] this device and they give it to you when you show your ticket. You plug it into the cup holder and it's got this long gooseneck flexible thing and you adjust [that]. It's got this little screen, it's all baffled so that nobody but the person who's looking directly into it can see the words and it shows the words, the captions of what's showing on the screen. I've only used it once but it worked really well.

¹ To explain: David sings in a choir which has been performing recently.

Perry:

Okay. All right.

David:

It's worth doing. As I say it's part of the ticket price, so why not do it?

Perry:

Oh okay. I hadn't realised that. I mean I don't have the problem. My hearing is pretty reasonable. I mean I was probably too close to too many speakers at music gigs when I was younger and I've probably lost the top level, but well that all goes so pretty quickly.

David:

Oh yeah.

Perry:

The one time I knew where I'd lost the top level hearing was when my kids were in their teens and I'd placed one of those possum repellent noise-making little motion detector machine. So you buy this tiny little box that's got a motion detector and when it sees possums running around it puts out a high pitched whistle that the possums don't like and off it goes. So you walk down past it and the lights flash to say that yes, it's picked up the movement and my son was saying "What's that noise? What's that noise? I can hear this sort of high whistling."

[But for me] No. Absolutely nothing. Nothing. Completely oblivious.

David:

That goes, yeah.

Perry:

And I thought good, not only does it get rid of the possums, it gets rid of the teenagers as well.

David:

That's cruel.

Perry:

Yeah it is a bit cruel. But anyway he has been to my house recently and he's now in his mid-20s and he did not say that he could hear it. So there's obviously a fair drop off in top-level high pitched tones from around about your mid teens to mid 20s. It's a bit odd really. You would have thought that it would have held on for a little bit longer than that. But anyway what can we do?

Anyway let's hope that people will be able to sit around during winter and have a nice glass of something even if it is non-alcoholic and cup of tea, nice glass of whiskey or something and read a book or watch a movie.

And because that's what we're doing reasonable amount of, I think I'm getting the impression that my reading is starting to pick up. I've read a couple of good books lately, one of them which I will talk about in just a minute. And so I think my reading chops are...

David:

...picking up a little bit? I really don't think mine is. I've read 15 books, in fact there's only 14 I think this year, this entire year. For me that's incredibly low.

Perry:

I've read a bit more than that, I'm up to about 20 but that's still not much further than you. But the thing to do is to find the good short novels and get back into it that way. Sort of like we spoke about *Typhoon* last time. That was an excellent short novel and if people want something just to tie them over to get them going to pick up a short novel and there's a lot of those around.

There are a few Substack newsletters that also talk about short novels. Maybe we should talk about some of the Substack newsletters at some point.

David:

The trouble with those as there are too many of them.

Perry:

Well, there's bucket loads of them now and you know, the only way to be able to find them is if somebody tells you about them or recommends that you go and have a look at them. Because otherwise, you're never going to find them because there's just way too many of them. It's taken over from blogs and all that stuff from a long time ago. And you just get swamped with all this stuff and you just can't keep up. So let's not try to keep up. Those days are gone. That boat sailed years ago that you'd be able to keep up and know what's going on. You just basically have to try and find the stuff that you like or stuff that somebody recommends to you.

So why don't we move to a book that I can definitely recommend.

Discussion

Karla's Choice by Nick Harkaway

Perry:

The book that we're going to be talking about this particular episode is *Karla's Choice* by Nick Harkaway.

Now, I've been told by friends that I should always give my ratings up front. So I will and then I'll go to explain why that rating is what it is. Although people get a little bit twitchy about me giving, you know, decimal point ratings. Well, that's just me. It's my affectation. I just go with it.

I gave this one 4.3 out of 5. So if you want to, you can round it up to 4.5. And I reckon that's about where this one sits. So this is a new novel first published last year in 2024 and it's set wholly within the John Le Carré's British espionage universe, centered around the Secret Service Agency known as the Circus.

Now, the lead character in this universe is George Smiley. And he had the central role in Le Carré's novels, *Call for the Dead*, *A Murder of Quality*, which were very early, short Penguin crime novels. Then there was *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy*, which everybody will probably remember, especially from the Alec Guinness TV adaptation. And that was followed by *The Honorable Schoolboy* and *Smiley's People*.

The last three of those, *Tinker Tailor*, *Schoolboy* and *Smiley's People*, made up a sort of trilogy of a search for Karla. And Karla's important because it's *Karla's Choice*. He's in the title.

Now Smiley also appeared as a supporting character in about four other Le Carré novels and most recently was prior to this was 2017's *A Legacy of Spies* written by John Le Carré.

David:

Don't forget *The Spy Who Came in From the Cold*. Because he appears at the end of that.

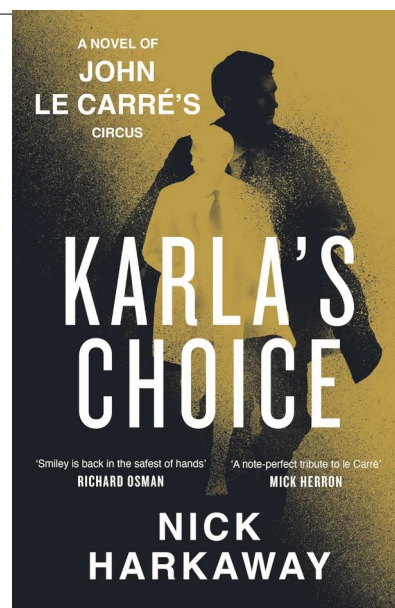
Perry:

Yeah, I did say that he's appeared in four others... One of those is that and he also appears in a couple of the others that were there, I think *Looking Glass War* and one other. But anyway, yeah, he's in those and we will touch on *The Spy Who Came in From the Cold* a bit later.

Now, Le Carré died in 2020. And basically, we all of us readers who are really keen on these books thought that was the end of the Smiley novels because he's gone. And yet now we have another one featuring good old George in a central role. And so the question you have to ask ourselves is who is this Nick Harkaway who's written this book and how did he come to write it?

Well, to put it simply, Nick Harkaway's birth name is Nicholas Cornwell. And he's the son of David Cornwell, which was the real name of the author behind John Le Carré. So he's keeping it all on the family, so to speak.

Now I find it interesting that Harkaway did not take on the name of Nick Le



Carré. But maybe [he] thought that might be pushing things a bit too far, but you know, it might have fitted, but you know, maybe not. Anyway, Nick Harkaway is already a published author with seven novels published under his name, or that of his pseudonym, Aidan Truhen. Now there's lots of pseudonyms and pen names floating around here, but you really only have to remember Le Carré, it's John Le Carré and Harkaway. The rest of them just make everything confusing and you don't really need to know what they are.

So in an interview on another podcast called "Spybary", which is about spy novels, which I should tell you a bit about some stage, David, because it's quite a good little podcast. In an interview that Harkaway gave on that podcast in October 2024, he stated that he really had no intention of writing any books in this timeline until his brother asked him to do so. He then went away and read all the Smiley novels and thought, well, tried writing some small snippets featuring the character, see if he could get the voice right. He could and he did.

And we also learned from that interview on the "Spybrary" podcast that Le Carré himself had been contemplating further novels in the Smiley sequence at the time of his death. Now this was revealed in a collection of Le Carré's letters titled *A Private Spy*, published in 2022, edited by Tim Cornwell, Nick's brother. This is the Tim that said to Nick, why don't you think of... So you can see the threads moving here, that one son has said to the other, look, dad was looking at extending this and doing a bit extra. Why don't we do something? And so the suggestion was made and off they went.

Now in that interview also, Harkaway does point out that he used none of his father's ideas in the writing of this particular novel. He just basically did it all himself.

So the end result of one brother's idea and other's tentative writings is the novel that we have before us, *Karla's Choice*. And a good one it is too. How good it is and how it fits into the Smiley world we'll discuss as we go along here.

Now this particular novel starts a few months after the end of *The Spy Who Came in From the Cold*, the one that you mentioned earlier. The novel that ends with the death of Alec Leamas as he attempts to flee over the Berlin Wall. That was made into a film with Richard Burton in the role of Alec Leamas. And I've read recently that Le Carré wasn't too keen on the idea of having Richard Burton play that role in the first instance because he thought that Burton was a bit too flamboyant, too well known. And basically, you know, he wouldn't be able to bring himself down to playing that role. But if you watch the film, Burton's fantastic. He just holds everything in and you can see there's a huge amount of energy and tension floating around inside him that you really need somebody like Burton to be able to get out and he does it and really incredibly well.

Now getting back to *The Spy Who Came in From the Cold*. After the death of Leamas, Smiley is devastated by his death. He takes it personally and resigns from the service. Besides that he's basically, he's in his late fifties now and he's



Nick Harkaway. Photo by Tom Coates

had enough time in the service and he really wants time to be able to rekindle his marriage to Lady Anne and to indulge his love of Baroque German literature. He's always got these very strange little interests, has George. But as we know in fiction, things don't quite work out the way you want them to and something crops up.

The cropping up is that in a London office of a small literary agency, a young Hungarian woman by the name of Susanna Gero, arrives at work one day to find that her employer, fellow Hungarian emigre László Bánáti has disappeared. Now while she's worrying about where he is, a professional killer named Miki Bortnik arrives with the professed intention of killing Bánáti. But he has a change of heart on the doorstep and decides against the killing. So Gero shuts him away in the office and heads out, but not to a police station where you thought she might go. But to an office she's aware of, where she explains the situation to a woman there.

Now this office is actually part of the Circus and shortly after the story of Gero, Bánáti and Bortnik starts to be known, Control, who's the head of this part of the intelligence services, decides that George Smiley is the correct person to get to the bottom of what is going on and if possible to debrief Bortnik to gather any intelligence on Moscow Central he may or might be able to divulge, because you take any opportunity you can and you get your best guys in to be able to do the work.

While George is not actually still in the service, Control thinks he's probably going to be the best to do it. And of course we know that George is the best spy going so of course he's got to do it. Now Smiley soon learns that Bánáti is not who he appears to be. This is the guy that's done the runner. That he's really a Soviet agent by the name of Ferencz Róka who has been living a clandestine life in London for close to a decade.

And now we are aware that Bortnik certainly intended to kill him, but Smiley doesn't know why. He learns of Róka's son Léo who is somewhere behind the Iron Curtain and of Irene, Léo's mother who is a poet living in Budapest. Now Léo had been arrested at some point prior to the start of this particular novel, has been arrested in East Berlin and interrogated but he's now gone missing and nobody knows where he is. Róka has been using his old contacts to try to locate Léo, his son, and have him released if possible. So why is this seemingly inconsequential activity resulted in a high level of assassin being sent to dispatch him? Who has Róka angered in Moscow Central? Because he's obviously trod on somebody's toes and somebody doesn't like him and wants him out of the way.

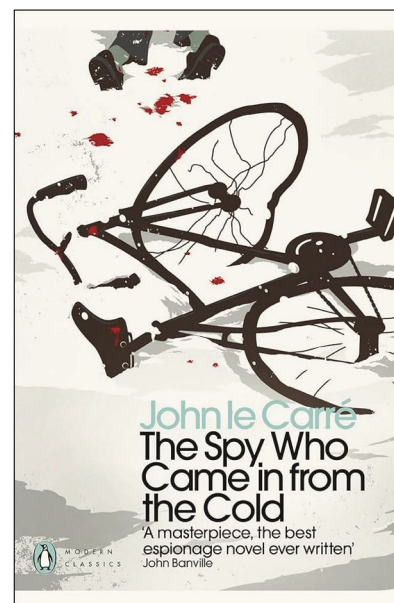
So the rest of this novel follows Smiley as he gets more and more involved in the affair as he attempts to find out the reason why this assassin was sent. It's not giving away any spoilers due to the novel's title that the person involved is none other than Karla, a mid-level manager in Moscow Central's 13th directorate and the man who Smiley had thought [was] probably shot after a purge of the Soviet intelligence agencies in the 1950s. Now we learn in one of the later books that Smiley had actually met Karla once in Delhi as Karla was flying home to face the music or a bullet. And Smiley had attempted to convince him to defect, but Karla took his chances back in Moscow and now seems to have prospered or at least he seems to have survived.

Now this novel attempts to fill in the gap between *The Spy Who Came in From the Cold* and *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy*, a period of about 10 years during which Karla moved upwards from a respected field agent to the head of Moscow Central. Harkaway here has contrived the storyline which goes some way to explaining how he might have achieved that feat and you will not be unsurprised to learn that it is intimately involved with Róka in his search for his son.

It's all very well done indeed, it all comes together really very nicely. But the big question about this novel really is does Harkaway have the Le Carré voice? Does he have the literary chops to pull off this act of ventriloquism and convince the reader he may actually be reading a book by the father rather than by the son? So to this reader he does.

Now David I'm not a Le Carré expert by any means, so only thoughts I might have on this are from a general reader's perspective. But for me it works. The first 50 pages or so are a bit of a slog, it seems a bit heavy going to get there, but after that it basically settles down pretty well and it follows quite nicely through to a satisfying end for a reader. Not for all the books characters, not everybody comes out of this really well. But it's great to see good old George Smiley back in harness once more.

So what did you think of it David?



David:

I enjoyed it a great deal for all the reasons that you've said. He does a good job. It's an excellent homage to his father's legacy I thought. Good story, interesting plot, great recreation of the characters like Smiley, Control, Peter Guillam, Connie, Bill Hayden, Tony Esterhese. It fits very carefully into the timeline of the Circus and into Smiley's life.

I did like... you mentioned his feelings of regret about Alec Leamas' death and that's very clear in this which certainly doesn't come up in *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy*. So I suppose in a way this novel fits in between to show his emotions at the death of Alec Leamas and so that's interesting.

I guess it also, it's clever because Leamas dies really because of the—I haven't read the book in years and years—but Leamas dies because of the schemings of a double agent who's an East German Stasi guy called Mundt. And this plot involves Smiley having to deal with Mundt again and get his help, basically. And so there's this conflict. I thought that was very good, it was like a really interesting twist on *The Spy Who Came in From the Cold*. So that was good. I think this novel fills in a fair bit more about Mundt as well.

Perry:

I mean, there's a lot going on in this. You could really write a very long talk about this for ages in terms of going through all the plot. I didn't want to basically do that and give away spoilers. But Mundt plays a big part and there's a few comments in the book about how he really is out to look after himself. Mundt plays both ends against the middle. But you can understand it if you're a double agent and you're working for the Stasi, but also working for British intelligence at the same time. You're going to be playing things very close to your chest and you're not giving anything away to anybody. And you're not going to tell one side anything more than you absolutely need to in order to ensure that your future is going to be one without a bullet through the back of the [head].

David:

That's right.

Perry:

Mundt wants to get out of if things go really badly wrong in East Germany, he wants to be able to leave and know that he can go and be set up somewhere in Great Britain and he'll be fine. But he's German and he loves living in Germany. And so he wants to stay there and he wants to stay in that whole middle Europe area. But he does play one end off against the middle.

David:

The other interesting thing I wanted to say about the book was that this is something that hadn't occurred to me before, I suppose, and didn't doesn't come up really in the *Karla* trilogy [and that] is the fact that these characters, *when* they were born and the historical events that they've lived through.

So we get talk about a boy on a train, right, who's a crucial part of the story, a boy in an armored train. And the train is a Russian train as part of the Russia-Japanese War of 1904. And the Tsar is still in power. And so they're celebrating the Tsar and you think, oh my God, that was a different era, that must be hundreds of years go. But no, no, no. Smiley and Karla lived through these events. The Russian-Japanese War, which is an amazing thing to have happened in 1904. And of course, the Russian Revolution in 1917. And so, oh yeah, Karla must come from before the Russian Revolution. He grew up under the Tsar. So I thought that was really interesting, something I hadn't even thought of before, I suppose.

Perry:

You get the impression that Karla's about ten years older, somewhere around that, than Smiley.

David:

Yeah, yeah, I think it's about right.

Perry:

It's probably, as I said, mid-late 50s when this book starts. So the book starts in, it's set in 1963. So it's a few months after *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold*. So you'd have to think that Smiley was born 1907, 1908, somewhere around there. And maybe Karla was maybe 10 to 15 years before that.

David:

The thing about the age of George Smiley is there's a really, really interesting Authors' Note at the start, which is well worth reading and re-reading, where Harkaway talks about his experience of George. And he says that the age of George is kind of fixed in all the books. He doesn't actually, he's kind of always in his 50s. That's the feeling you have about George. And he talks about trying to be consistent. You can't be consistent with the books because the book, his father's original books weren't consistent about when George was born and how old exactly he is. And so he doesn't try to match it in there.

I did want to quote a bit of that Author's Note if you'll bear with me.

Perry:

Yeah, sure.

David:

So this is Nick Harkaway or Nicholas Cornwell:

I grew up with George. His presence in various forms was a friendly ghost at my table. First there was my father's George, voiced tight and sometimes raised in outrage. Then a moment later coming from the gut to deliver truth, however dark. Next there was Sir Alec Guinness's version, soft, wayward and thoughtful, as if genius could only ever step briefly from fog. Michael Jayston read Smiley in an abridged audiobook and I listened to the cassettes every night to fall asleep. Then later my father read his own book in the same format. His cadence is now mingled with Guinness's, which was he said why he couldn't write as many books in the sequences he had originally intended. The external Smiley [the one from the media] had supplanted the one in his head.

So, I thought that was a really, really interesting point.

Perry:

Because it even happens to the author. I must admit, as I was reading this, I was picturing everybody from that first [TV] series in their roles here. So I'm looking at Alec Guinness there and I'm looking at Ian Richardson as Hayden and all the others. Jim Prideaux turns up as well. So, there's a lot that goes on here.

There's a couple of things that I wanted to ask you about. Thinking to *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy* and what that particular book is about in terms of the search for the mole inside the Circus. Did you get any hints in this particular book that Control was thinking that somebody was leaking secrets? I thought there was one little hint. I think that there is a bit of a hint. That Control had said, "Yeah, something's going on and something's getting out." If you found it as well, that's good.

David:

I think it only happens once and it's very slight and very fleeting.

Perry:

I read that and I thought, "Oh, am I thinking too much of what I know coming up ahead in *Tinker Tailor*?" and I'm pushing that in on top of what I've just read in



Alec Guinness as George Smiley in the BBC TV series

this particular novel. Or is there actually a hint here that Harkaway has just tossed in that Control is thinking that maybe somebody inside the inner circle of the Circus.

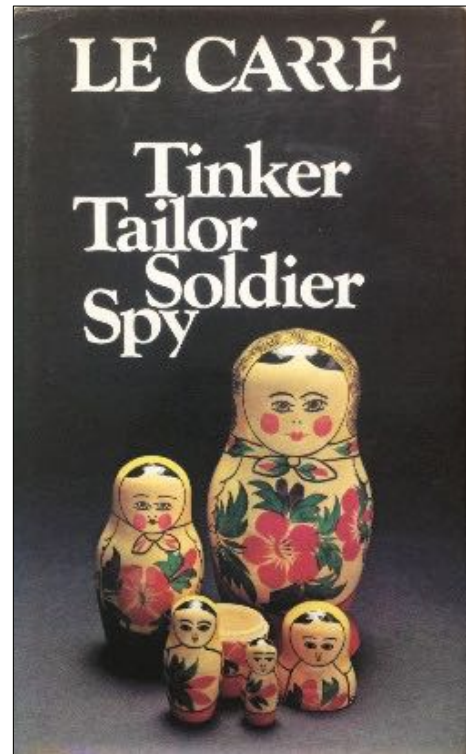
David:

I would agree with you. I think there is. I can't remember now what the actual hint was, but I think there is that sense of the thing.

Perry:

Yeah, I think he's talking to Smiley about something that he has lost a bit of trust in a few people, but he won't say who they are and what's going on. But then he moves on. And that's another one of the reasons why he wants to bring Smiley in to be able to do this.

Now, I suppose that in some ways, the fact that we have this particular book and it covers a period in 1963, there's still the years 1964 through to about 1970 or thereabouts when *Tinker Tailor* is supposed to happen. Do you see Harkaway writing any other books featuring Smiley?



David:

I think it will be very tempting for him to do so, but whether he can actually pull it off... Because you get the impression... I think if you have too many instances of George being pulled back out of retirement, which of course happens at the beginning of both *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy* and *Smiley's People*, it's going to become too much of a cliché. It might be interesting for him to focus on other characters, not Smiley maybe. If [he] could pull that off, it would be interesting. Yeah, it's interesting to think that, but who knows, it's up to him obviously, but it would be interesting for him to try and see if he could fit it in, or even later maybe, after the conclusion of *Smiley's People*.

Perry:

Yeah, because there's basically the point that, yes, I agree with you about the cliché of that plot device to be able to bring Smiley back into the action by calling [him] back in after he's retired. And he retires about three times and it's been done. He can't...

David:

It's just like Dame Nellie Melba, isn't it really?

Perry:

Yeah, you just can't do it again. So actually, it's a good point that concentrating on some of the other characters and maybe having somebody going to see Smiley and asking him a question and asking him for help. And Smiley goes off and does some of his own research and doesn't get actually called in by Control, but gets called in by Guillam or one of the others or Prideaux or somebody or other like that.

But anyway, yeah, I thought this was great. Now, I suppose people are wondering why we concentrate so much on these particular books, but there's a very

interesting quote on the back of this particular novel and it's from Margaret Atwood, who we all know. And the quote reads, "The Smiley novels are key to understanding the 20th century."

Now, I think that's probably a tad too strong, but I do believe that they're very key to understanding how Britain saw itself in the 1960s in relation to their Cousins, as they refer to them over there in the US and Moscow. And you get a very good idea of how it all plays together and what they're thinking and what's happening in Europe through these particular books. I wouldn't say it's key, but I'd say that the books that Le Carré wrote were some of the major novels in the late quarter of the last century. And it's very good to see that Harkaway has brought good old George back into the fray. And it was an excellent read. I really enjoyed it.

David:

Yeah, I agree. I really enjoyed it too. But when you think about the Smiley novels or in fact the whole of John Le Carré's opus, he's actually a fantastic prose stylist. And Harkaway isn't as good as that.

Perry:

Probably, okay. I'll give you that.

David:

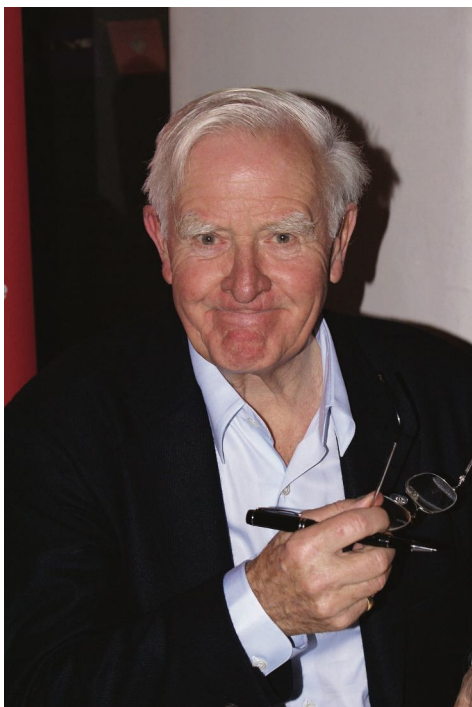
There's some beautiful prose, some beautiful *literary* prose in John Le Carré's books. And Harkaway isn't, to me, isn't quite that.

Perry:

Isn't quite that. Yeah. That style.

David:

And particularly dealing with character. One of the things I always admired about John Le Carré is the way he depicts character brilliantly, often just with action. And I don't know, he just has a way, I could quote some things, but you're



John Le Carré, photo by
Krimidoedel

probably sick of me talking. But, you know, he really did have a way with describing character, which isn't there in the Harkaway's book. But that's okay. I mean, it's, you know, you can't be someone else. You can't be your father. And he's still a good writer. But he doesn't have quite that edge of literary quality, I would have thought.

Perry:

Yeah. So that's probably why I brought it down a little bit. I mean, I think *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy* is just a wonderful novel, I think. *Spy Who Came in From the Cold* is fantastic as really the first of his major novels to come out the way that it did. And it went gangbusters when it came out. And then the film version, of course, is also extremely worthwhile watching.

And yeah, so it's good to have him back. Do I want another one? Maybe not for a few years, though. I don't want to see one coming out every year. I don't want this to be... well, in the interview on "Spybrary" that Nick Harkaway

gives, he basically says his father never set this out to be a franchise. You know, he didn't want it all to go like the Marvel Cinematic Universe. He didn't want it all to fit neatly. And so it doesn't fit neatly, which is why there are problems. There are gaps in it. And, you know, having this bit filled in actually gives you some nice detail about the people in Moscow and the people in London and how they're interacting at this really crucial juxtaposition. It's good. It's good.

David:

Have you read any of Harkaway's other books?

Perry:

No.

David:

Because he wrote a lot of science fiction, didn't he?

Perry:

Yeah, yeah. He's written seven or eight novels. So yes, a lot of science fiction, but I haven't read any of them. But I think I probably will now. I think I'll probably go and have a look and see what he's done. But again, as we were saying, you can't keep up with everybody.

I knew of Nick Harkaway. I knew the name. I just hadn't got around to reading anything by him, but I probably will now. Well, beyond this one, of course.

Well, I think we're done with that.

David:

I think we've thrashed that book today.

Perry:

Well, we could keep going for hours on this.

David:

We could probably keep going for hours. But also, there's some bits of Le Carré I would like to quote, but I won't. I'll restrain myself. You should be thankful.

Perry:

You can talk about a lot of this, but we didn't want to give away too many spoilers because there's enough here that we've described. And I think that's probably enough to give people the...

David:

Go read the book.

Perry:

Yeah, go read the book. Heartily recommend it is the end of the message. If you like any of the Le Carré stuff at all, go read the book. Absolutely. Simple as that.



***Parasite*, directed by Bong Joon Ho**

David:

Well, I'm going to talk about a movie. And the movie is *Parasite* directed by Bong Joon Ho.

Bong Joon Ho is a multi-award-winning Korean filmmaker. He's probably best known by English language viewers, at least, for writing and directing the film *Snowpiercer*, which was released in 2013. Which I actually quite liked. It's wacky. But I like wacky.

But today, we're talking about the film *Parasite*, which was released in 2019. It won the Palme d'Or at the Cannes Film Festival. And then the Academy Award for Best Picture in 2020. The first non-English language film ever to do so.

Perry:

It won the Academy Award for Best Picture and the Academy Award for Best International Feature Film in the same year.

David:

Wow.

Perry:

Don't think that's been done before, as you say. Foreign features haven't won the Best Picture Award ever.

David:

No, indeed. So, it's all in Korean, obviously with subtitles, which was fine because I'm used to watching subtitles anyway. And you know, after a little while watching something with subtitles, it just becomes subconscious and you kind of think that you're listening to the people speak those words.

So, anyway, it's good. I start by saying I thought it was excellent. I really enjoyed it. It's been described as a black comedy. That's a pretty good description, I

suppose. But while it's black, I didn't feel it was a *dark* film. At the end, I sort of gave a sad chuckle rather than a feeling of a sense of despair. It wasn't that depressing.

So what's it about? Well, it's set in Seoul, the capital city of South Korea. And the basic story is that of the impoverished Kim family, they are out of work and they have no money. They live in this sub-basement flat in the poorer regions of Seoul. Everyone in the family is out of work, as I said, and they don't have enough money even to pay for internet access. They're cribbing internet access wherever they can, holding up their phones in one corner of the building trying to catch the signal from a cafe nearby.

Anyway, the actual story, their son, Ki-woo, has carried out his compulsory period of military service, but he didn't manage to get into college. But one day, a friend he has from school who *has* gone to college turns up. His name is Min-Hyuk, and he turns up with a gift, which is a mounted piece of rock, which is from Min's grandfather's collection. Min tells Ki-woo that it's a "scholar's rock", which will ensure wealth. Now whether that's true or not, this rock ends up playing a key role in the story, and at a very crucial point in particular.

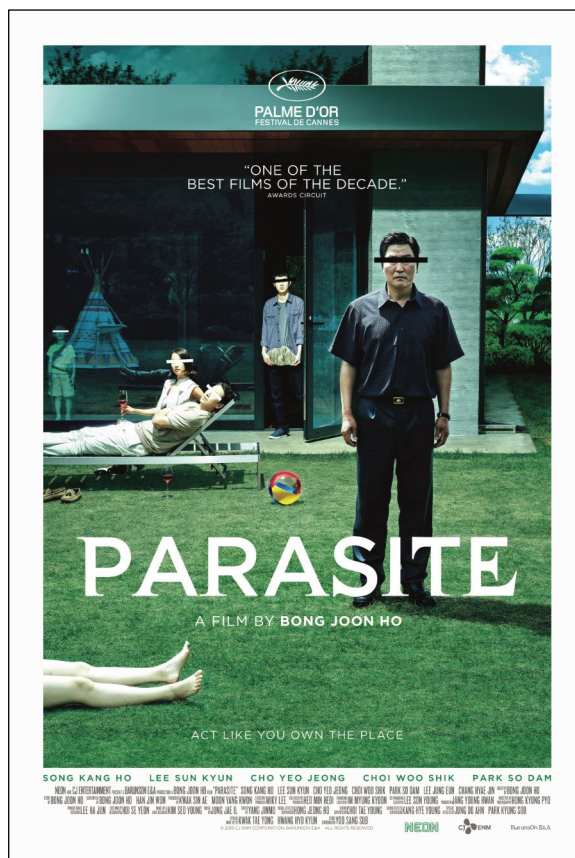
Then Min tells Ki-woo that he's going overseas for a few years, and he encourages Ki-woo to apply for Min's job as an English language tutor to the daughter of the rich Park family. Now Ki-woo's sister, Ki-jong, has very good Photoshop skills. She could have been a graphic designer if she could only find a job as that. And she helps him forge these college graduation certificates to present when he's interviewed for this job.

Now I won't go into the details of the plot. We can talk about that later. But for now, I'll simply say that Ki-woo will guess this job as tutor for this young girl. And ultimately, through various kinds of subterfuge, each member of the Kim family, father, mother, son and daughter, all end up employed in different roles in the Park household, getting the previous workers dismissed on various pretexts. All while concealing the fact from the Parks that they *are* all in fact from one family, because that would look a bit suspicious.

So all is going swimmingly, terrifically, and the Kim family are raking in heaps of money from these four jobs. But then there's a twist, and it all comes undone, and ends up in catastrophe, in fact a bloody catastrophe. Now I won't spoil it for you, maybe Perry will when we get to talking about it.

But what's the film *really* about? Well, as Ki-woo says frequently, it's so metaphorical.

More than anything, it's about the class structure and the vast gap in wealth, and thus the living standards of different parts of society, and also about the attitudes of the rich towards the poor. The Park family are almost obscenely rich. There's this incredible contrast between the Parks and the Kims. The Parks live in this



magnificent house which was designed by a world-class architect. But the Kims live in this miserable sub-basement, which is partly underground. It's really cramped, like the loo is actually in this little tiny mezzanine space that they've got, to go to the loo.

I was struck by what I thought was really excellent cinematography, which points up this difference really, really well. I noticed that inside the Parks' house, most of the shots are really wide, with the screen filled from edge to edge with the interior of a room, with the characters just set a middle distance or to one side of the view. But scenes inside the Kims' flat are close up, tight, almost claustrophobic, and it's just this tense inside [view].

We also have a great deal which tells us about the attitude of the Park family, particularly the businessman father, Dong-ik, towards those less fortunate than them. He says, "I can't stand people who cross the line," meaning the social line. Poor people wanting to be too familiar with a rich person.

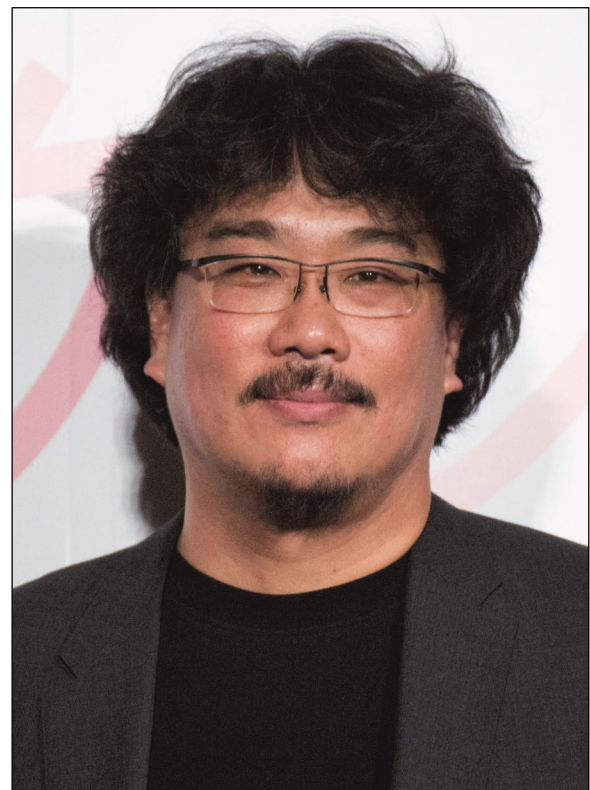
The Park family have the daughter who is being tutored by Kim Ki-woo, but they also have a young son, Da-Song, who is a bit of a tearaway, just a young kid. And at one point, he's wandering around, and he sniffs at each of the Kim family, all of whom are of course pretending to be strangers to each other, and exclaims that they all smell the same.

So there's this thing about smell, and later Dong-ik, the father, says, "It's the sub-basement smell," and he complains of the smell of the Kim family father who drives him around, he is now employed as his chauffeur. [Dong-ik] says, "In the car it becomes overwhelming. He smells like an old radish." And he says that, "You sometimes smell it on the subway. People who ride the subway have a smell." And to which his wife simply comments, "I can't remember the last time I used the subway." She's a bit of a ding-dong. "I can't remember the last time I used the subway."

So this sense of contempt, almost disgust of the poor, is really strong.

Part of the metaphor, of course, is *where* the two families live, not just their actual house, or dwelling place, but the location of that dwelling. It's clear through a number of shots that getting to the Park house involves climbing up a steep slope, they are on top of a hill. And later in the film there's a severe storm and a deluge of rain, and that water, of course, rushes down through the city to its lowest point and it floods the region where the Kim family are living, inundating their apartment, there's like chest-high water and sewage coming up through the loo, and it's horrible. And hundreds of people from that region are evacuated and have to spend the night sleeping together miserably in the school gym.

By contrast, the following day, when the Parks summon, they actually ring all these individual Kim family members,



Bong Joon Ho, photo by Thomas Johnson

because there's going to be a party for their young son, Da-song, the next day. And they want them all to come on a day when they would normally not be working, and come along and help with this party. And so they're all taking these calls while they're in this huge gym and desperate conditions. But they've got to get some clothes and turn up for this party.

So there's been this total disaster with the storm and the rain for all the poor people. But when they turn up to the parks, the wife of the Parks is saying, "Oh, isn't it lovely? Oh, that rain has washed away all the pollution. And it's actually a lovely sunny day today." It's just, "Oh, my God, they don't understand!" They have no understanding of what the poor people have had to go through.

Anyway, I don't want to go too much detail. But as I say, there's a twist where things go really, really, really badly wrong for all concerned. And there's just this little bit, I'd like to quote from the film, where the Kim family are lying in this gym at night. And while they're lying in the gym, Kim Ki-woo asks his father about his father's plan to fix this catastrophe that's gone wrong, or beginnings of the catastrophe that's gone wrong. And his father has said that he'd had a plan.

But while they're in the gym, his father says, "No, there is no plan." He says something like:

You know what kind of plan never fails? No plan at all. No plan. You know why? If you make a plan life never works out that way. Look around us. Did these people think "Let's all spend the night in a gym?" No. But look now, everyone sleeping on the floor, us included. That's why people shouldn't make plans. With no plan, nothing can go wrong and if something spins out of control it doesn't matter. Whether you kill someone, or betray your country. None of it f~~~~ matters. Got it?

So, you know, this is a real shock to the young kid, you know, life is like this, you know.

Look, I love the film. It's really enjoyable to watch. In fact, I actually watched it twice. Because I rented it. And when you rent something, you get 48 hours. And so, I watched it one night and I watched it again the second night. It was just as enjoyable as the second night. Well worth watching. Highly recommended.

Perry:

It's interesting to note that it also won the Academy Award for Best Original Screenplay for that year. So, it did very well. Best Director.

David:

Which was written by Bong Joon Ho.

Perry:

Yeah. And so, it's got a good script. It's got good direction.

I was very interested in your point about the difference in the cinematography and the sets and the way everything's set up for the house, the luxurious house, as opposed to the skungy sub-basement that they have to live in. There's also this, the use of color is also, and lighting is very different.

David:

Yeah.

Perry:

In the basement, everything's really garish and the colors are really, almost comic book colors, but up in the house, it's all *Vogue* living and everything is laid out beautifully and the wooden floor is just polished to perfection.

David:

And that huge window.

Perry:

That huge window, looking out onto the lawn into the garden, which features quite heavily a bit later on.

But you're talking about it being a black comedy. Well, it actually starts out. For about the first hour of this, it is actually rather comic. The whole thing is just, the way that the Kim family starts basically leeching off the Parks, integrating their whole lives into their particular lives. It's really very well done, comic and really quite funny. And then it takes a turn towards the dark side. You can't really say anything about it because it just gives the whole thing away. So you can't give any spoilers here.

Even though it's four or five years old, I think a lot of people probably still haven't seen it because they probably thought, "Oh, you know, Korean film, subtitles, you know, maybe I won't go and see it. Oh, no, I can't see this."

I'm sorry I missed it when it first came out. No, this is wonderful. remember my son telling me how much he enjoyed it. But it does take a really weird turn. Changes gears completely halfway through and then becomes something else. But it actually fills out the whole thing. And everybody's a parasite in this. You know, the Kims are a parasite off the Parks. And the wealthy Parks are parasites because they just basically take whatever they... they just assume that they're going to get everything they want. And they do.

David:

I think it's interesting too that just at the point where it's about to... Well, in fact, the twist, which I won't give away, that point that the Kim family, are starting to



Director and cast in 2019, photo by Kinocine

consider that they may have a little bit of remorse because they've actually done in the prospects of other poor people by replacing them in the Park [household] You know, they've put other people out of jobs. That comes back to bite them with a vengeance.

Perry:

Yeah. Yeah. Well, the father, the Kim father basically, who's now the chauffeur actually says at some point, tries to convince himself that he hasn't done this. So basically saying, "Oh, no, the guy's gone on to a better job. He must have gone on to a better job." Well, how could he get a better job than this? I mean, he's got to drive the head of the household to and from work and sure he's got to be around to drive him wherever he wants to go. But he's only got one client and he's got a good car and he can go where he wants. And so I don't see how he's going to end up getting a better job. I think [the Kim father] is just trying to convince himself that doing him out of the job was not such a bad thing after all.

David:

Yeah. But I suppose that's part of the point, isn't it? To get anywhere, it's dog-eat-dog down at the level of the poor. To get anywhere, you've really got to step on someone else. That's the problem.

Perry:

Yes. Yes. And it does actually accentuate the vast differences in the classes here. They're really very, very far apart. It's not as if the Kims are middle class. They are dirt poor. And they're really quite intelligent people because they're all very good at the work they do.

David:

That's true. They're actually all very good at the jobs they do.

Perry:

They're all very, very good at work. They just have not had the opportunity to be able to get ahead. And the Parks, who basically give the impression that they're not good at *anything*, but they have just had the opportunity to get there and they've made the most of what they've got or they've had it presented to them. And they just assumed that everybody else is like this. And off they go.

It's a lovely piece of work, a very, very good piece of work.

This director recently, his most recent film is *Mickey 17*.

David:

Yes, I want to see that.

Perry:

Well, it's not up to the level of this by any means. It's still, it's still an enjoyable film, but not up to the level of this one. This one's, this one's a classic. And in fact, it ends up that this one appears... *Parasite* has been chosen as one of the top 200 films ever made by *Sight and Sound*. And it also appears on the *1001 Films You Must See Before You Die*, which of course is, as I've pointed out, I think previously, the 1001 films is now something like 1250 because the 1001 came out, but they've added more films on and they've decided not to drop films off at the back end, but to add on new films as they come in. And this is one that they've added in. So it appears on a lot of best lists all the way.

So, yep, enjoyable, very enjoyable film.

David:

Yeah. The other interesting thing before we totally leave it is that according to Wikipedia anyway, Bong Joon Ho is planning a TV series based on the film. So how that would work out, I don't know, but it's interesting, but it's still in production according to, at least according to Wikipedia.

Perry:

I would have thought he would have given away all of the endings here now after with the...

David:

Interesting to see what he does with it.

Perry:

Yeah. Look, I thought this was, this is what, a bit over two hours long, something like just a bit over two hours long. And I think that's about right. I mean, it really does give you that feeling that there is two halves to this particular, there's two halves to the lives that you're seeing and two halves to the film.

The first half is that comic set up. And then there's the second half, which you've got to work your way through because you know, you can basically get there in that first half of this, you're getting closer up and you start thinking, oh, something bad's got to happen. Something bad's got to happen. And things do happen, whether they're bad or not, you can figure it out. But interesting, really, really good stuff.

David:

Yeah. Have you watched *Snowpiercer*?

Perry:

No, I haven't.

David:

Oh, that's worth watching. It's, as I say, it's wacky, but it's, maybe we can watch that another time and maybe we can talk about that another time on the podcast.

Perry:

Yeah, okay. Because he's very, he's obviously a very innovative and interesting filmmaker. And there are fewer around when they come along and you've got to basically latch on to watch and start watching everything they do and keeping up with what they do because they're just worthwhile. And he's obviously one of these that people need to keep an eye on.

David:

Absolutely.

Perry:

All right. I think we're done with our film and...



What Else We've Been Reading and Watching

David:

Do you just want to talk about briefly other things we've been reading and watching?

Perry:

Oh, okay. Yes. What have I been watching? So, just finished watching the new Seth Rogen comedy series called *The Studio*, which is on Apple. Up and down, starts well, but flat in the middle and picks up at the end. Brian Cranston from *Breaking Bad* has an absolutely fantastic role as the CEO of the Continental Studios, which is the studio of the title. And he's wonderful. Seth Rogen at times, I think, goes a bit over the top. But in essence, that's what he's attempting to do. He's one of these... He's playing a character who's always looking for people to approve of what he does. And he just, at one point, he says, "I was just trying to be cool. I was just trying to be cool." He's not cool in and of himself, but he's trying to act that way. And of course, he stuffs it up all the way down the line.

So at times, he can get irritating and then you realize, "No, he's actually true to character because that character *would* be really, really irritating."

David:

I started watching it. I've only seen three episodes before on my Apple TV subscription dropped out. But there was one in particular that I've seen so far, which was just fantastic, where he turns up when they're on the last... They're trying to get the last shot of a movie with the light just right and it's a continuous shot. And he just stuffs it [up]. It's just... It's hysterical.

Perry:

He just gets it because he wants like the money shot. I won't be in the way. I won't be in the way, whether... But he's always in the way. Whatever he does, he just basically always... That was a great episode.

David:

I will watch the rest of it when I get to my Apple TV sub back again.
So anything else?



Perry:

I've read a couple of interesting first contact novels.

The one thing that you can basically pretty much guarantee other than *Shogun*, which we've discussed previously, as being a first contact novel because you don't get those much anymore other than in science fiction. So *Shroud* by Adrian Tchaikovsky. Tchaikovsky is a very interesting writer. Very prolific though. He puts out two or three books a year. So, you know, he's really churning it out. But and you think, well, because of that, the quality is not going to be good. *Shroud's* great. Really, really good.

David:

I'm only part way through it, so don't give away any...

Perry:

No, I won't give anything away, but it is really, really good.

The other one that I read just recently was *A Darkling Sea* by James Kembriss. First novel for him. Also a first contact story. It's not as good as *Shroud*, that's for sure. But there's some very interesting pieces in it.

And maybe at some point we can have a talk about first contact novels and just go with one in particular and then carry on from there and have a talk about them because with you and I have discussed things about first context stuff previously and some of the same problems occur in these books. But I would recommend *Shroud* by Adrian Tchaikovsky. Absolutely.

David:

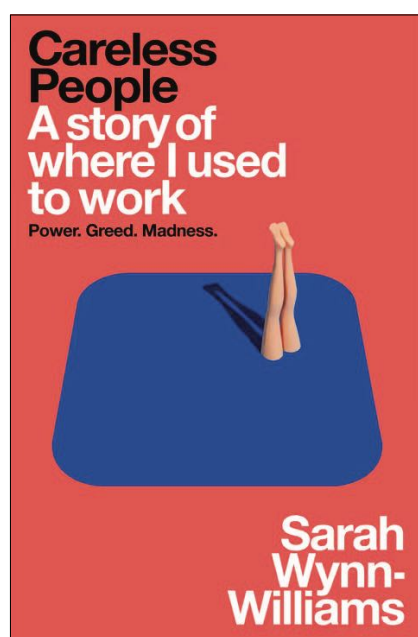
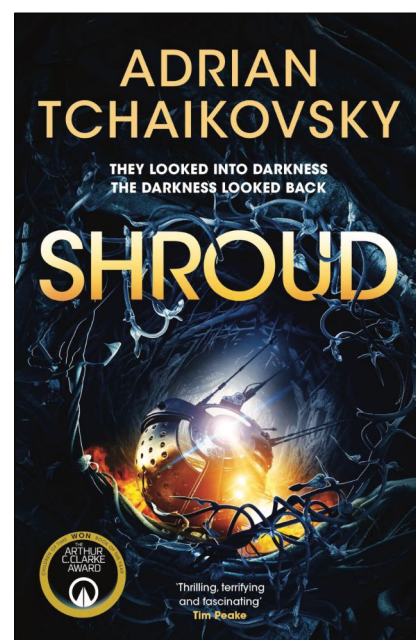
Great. I'm looking forward to finishing that. I'm about halfway through.

Well, I've got one book and a few films to briefly talk about. I must say I'm reading so little at the moment, it's ridiculous. But the book I've finished recently was *Careless People* by Sarah Wynn-Williams. And the subtitle of that is *A Story of Where I Used to Work*. And where she used to work was Facebook. She was working there for a long time. She ended up being like the Director of Global Communications.

This book is an expose of the thinking of the senior executives of Facebook, the lack of care and responsibility for how Facebook is used by around the world, how it's misused by governments, how much evil it can do. And it's also a condemnation of their treatment of their staff because she was sexually harassed by her boss. Facebook [or Meta] has sued Wynn-Williams over the book and has succeeded in preventing her from promoting it in the US. So all of which really is why you should read it. If they don't want you to read it, you *should* read it.

Perry:

Absolutely. Definitely.



David:

Well worth reading. Very interesting book actually. She starts off telling about an instance in her childhood where she was bitten by a shark. Like *badly* bitten by a shark. [She's] from New Zealand, interesting. But anyway, that's neither here nor there, but it's kind of a horrific start to the book.

What I've been watching, I've watched some movies. I watched *The Favourite*, directed by Yorgos Lanthimos. Very interesting. Set in the court of Queen Anne of England in the early 1700s. This triangular relationship really between Queen Anne and two other people, two other women. A lot of brilliant cinematography. These ultra-wide lenses and much moving along dark corridors with actors just carrying candles, as the only illumination. Good stuff.



I watched *Joker* with Joaquin Phoenix as the title character. Very much more of a psychological thriller than a comic book adaptation. This is the Joker out of the Batman series. Very much a psychological thriller than a comic book thing. Phoenix apparently lost some 23 kilograms of weight in order to play the role. My God it shows. You see [shots with him] naked to the waist and he's just all ribs. He's all bones. It looks incredible. You wonder how he managed to do it, he lost that much weight.

I'm not sure I'll bother talking about the other things. I've been re-watching the *Mission Impossible* series because I'm preparing to watch the final episode tomorrow. That's about it.

Perry:

That's a good lead into what we're going to be talking about next month. We are going to be talking about that *Mission Impossible*.

David:

Maybe the last two movies. Theoretically, two parts of the one. We should talk about both of those.

Perry:

We're also talking about a book that you've recommended. Which is *Julia*.

David:

I forgot the name of the author now. What is the name of the author? Doesn't matter. Look it up. [It's Sandra Newman].

It's basically a retelling of George Orwell's *1984* from the point of view of the character Julia. She's the woman that Winston Smith falls for and eventually betrays. So it's interesting. I'll be interested to hear Perry's take on it.

Perry:

Okay. I shall be reading that in the next month.

We shall be back in about four weeks. Maybe four or four-and-a-bit weeks or a month with our next episode. We shall talk to the listener then.

David:

Indeed. Bye.