

The Constant Gardner (John le Carré)

Nasty multinational kills helpless Africans. Bound to be a plotline which plays well to right minded people. I quote, "*Old established British-based company is poisoning innocent Kenyans, using 'em as guinea pigs. Whole villages of corpses out there.*"

I struggled, though. The writing was rather plodding, I thought - despite some clever-Dickery at times. And so very parsimonious with plot advances. Virtually nothing much happened for the first two hundred pages, occupied as they were with the unengaging manoeuvrings of the ex-pat Foreign Office staff. I really didn't much care for any of them. Tessa, I concluded, was probably better off dead.

Justin, I eventually realised, was really George Smiley transported to Africa.

Le Carré's basic technique is to have the hero travel about the place meeting new characters who then provide the next bit of information to drive the plot forward. It's the same technique as used in Tinker, Tailor and all those other Smiley novels - not that I've read them, but it's clear from TV adaptations how it works. To be fair, it comes over well on the screen. But in print the leisurely pace is more dull than atmospheric. A rare example of a screen adaptation exceeding the written form perhaps.

Le Carré tries ever so hard to be right-on and progressive, with his virtue signalling anti-capitalist plot. I quote again, "*Tessa believed that the irresponsible quest for corporate profit is destroying the globe, and the emerging world in particular. Under the guise of investment, Western capital ruins the native environment and favours the rise of kleptocracies.*"

Well, a lot can happen in 15 years. Now it's mostly Chinese capital doing the dirty business.

Justin's murdered wife, Tessa, is presented to us as a flawless entity, a moral crusader and drop-dead gorgeous to-boot. The initial smears of her character serve only to accentuate her saintliness. Indeed, it was a good job that Tessa was safely dead - surely no living woman would have been able to sustain the weight of quite so much worship. Of her, the besotted Justin says, "*he understood the burden of beauty and the curse of always being an event*", thus establishing his gender-sensitive credentials.

But le Carré is an old fraud. He betrays his staggeringly antediluvian class attitude in his patrician depiction of the cleaner of Tessa's Chelsea house. He has her say, "*If it was alright by him, she'd like to continue coming (to clean) as before, please, Wednesdays just like when Miss Tessa was alive, it wasn't the money, it was the memory....*". What planet is le Carré on? Planet Downton Abbey?

Probably the most entertaining part - but for entirely the wrong reasons - was the bit about extracting data from Tessa's laptop, it was all so amusingly dated.

There must always be a human manifestation of villainy, the impersonality of a corporation will not do. Lorbeer fulfils the purpose. He is unprincipled, cowardly, hypocritical, fat, sweaty and - to cap it all - ginger haired. A clean sweep of negative characteristics. It is appropriate that it is Lorbeer that delivers this little speech,

"We give the food only to the women. The men, we don't trust those idiots to cross a road. No, sir. They sell our porridge in the markets. They have their women make strong drink with it. They buy cigarettes, guns, girls. The men are bums. The women make the homes, the men make the wars. The whole of Africa, that's one big gender fight, man."

It's probably so, but was it so before the white man stuck his oar into Africa? Charities and NGOs do often follow exactly Lorbeer's advice. International aid is arguably even more pernicious than the way Big Pharma is presented in this novel. In particular when aid is given direct to the women, men are cut out of the picture. What poor African man can compete with an international aid organisation? And men without the purposefulness of addressing the needs of their families become feckless and may turn to drink or join militias. Foreign aid is political and cannot be assumed to be socially benign, and social disruption leads to conflict. At least with capitalist corporations their motivation is never in doubt.