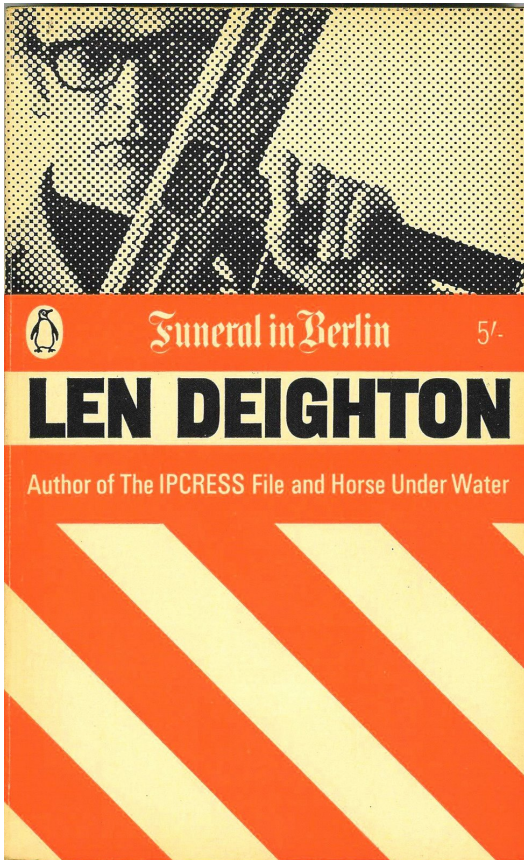


## The Book You Have to Read: “Funeral in Berlin,” by Len Deighton

**The Rap Sheet** – Editor’s note: This is the ninth instalment in our on-going Friday blog series highlighting great but forgotten books. Today’s selection comes from Tony Broadbent, author of *The Smoke*, *Spectres in the Smoke*, *Shadows in the Smoke* and *The One After 9:09 - A Mystery With A Backbeat*.



A question for you. How do you take your spies? Shaken or stirred? Hot-blooded or icy cool? In from the cold? With a twist? Up? Down? Old school? Public school? Oxbridge? Ivy League?

I yield to no man in my admiration of Ian Fleming’s creation, secret agent 007, James Bond. But all things considered, even in this year, the centenary of Fleming’s birth, I think I prefer my spies a lot less iconic and my spy stories a lot more ironic, if not downright cynical. I want a strong whiff of realism rather than outright “snobbery with violence.” All of which is to say that one book always on my needs-to-be-read-again pile is Len Deighton’s splendid *Funeral in Berlin*.

To quote the nameless narrator of this, the third entry in Deighton's series of "Secret Files" (the others being *The IPCRESS File* [1962], *Horse Under Water* [1963], and *Billion Dollar Brain* [1966]): "The greatest tribute you can pay a secret agent is to take him for a moron; all he has to do then is make sure he doesn't act like one." That frees us from "Bondage" in a single sentence.

First published in 1964, *Funeral in Berlin* seemed to have been ripped directly from the headlines. The Berlin Wall, not yet three years old, was a constant flashpoint and framed the Cold War political divide more clearly than any other entity or event, and would continue to do so for another 25 years.

Deighton's portrayal of the British Secret Service appears far more realistic than Fleming's or even Graham Greene's, for that matter. John le Carré's fictional "The Circus" has a great sense of realism, too, but unlike Fleming, Greene, or le Carré, Deighton never worked for either MI5 or MI6, neither was he a public-school boy; like his nameless hero he's a grammar-school boy--my kind of guy.

Deighton's creation, the secret agent with no name--dubbed "Harry Palmer" only in the film versions of the books--is also my kind of spy; an anti-hero who fights against the inequities and ineptitudes of the establishment as forcibly as he does the devious machinations of the enemy. He's also not above grappling with and commenting on the ethical and moral issues of his dark and deadly trade, as well as musing on the possible larger political ramifications at home and abroad. Deighton takes us through "the looking glass" in thought as well as deed.

Deighton's world of spies is also wonderfully freighted with the then growing sense of cynicism and revulsion in Britain toward the seemingly never-ending stream of betrayals and defections of real-life "upper-class" spies, including Guy Burgess, Donald Maclean, and Kim Philby. In fact, Deighton's stories had such an air of authenticity--with their extensive footnotes, memos, technical data, documents, and appendices--that the books were required reading at CIA headquarters in Langley, Virginia.

Funeral in Berlin is a complex story, true, but it is never too convoluted to follow or enjoy. It amply rewards close reading. Deighton's writing is superb in regards to description and detail, his dialogue often more than a match for Raymond Chandler, and in context of veracity of time and place and class, it's as good as Elmore Leonard at his best. All of which serves to make Funeral in Berlin one of the all-time greats from the Golden "Cold War" Age of the spy novel.

And what of the plot of Funeral in Berlin? British Intelligence sends our unnamed agent to Berlin to arrange the defection--for a price--of an important Soviet scientist. The hush-hush deal to spirit the scientist over the Wall is to be brokered by a onetime black-market colleague of our hero, a West German freelance wheeler-dealer with contacts at all levels of Berlin's shadowy intelligence community. Despite our hero's skepticism, the deal has the support of a senior civil servant at the Home Office in London, as well as, surprisingly, the head of Red Army Security in Soviet-controlled East Berlin. A funeral is duly arranged, with a casket and a body within; but this is just the first move in an increasingly deadly game of chess. (The allusion is Deighton's own; he graces each chapter heading with an appropriately pithy and pointed chess epigram.)

The New York Times called Funeral in Berlin "a ferociously cool fable, even better than The Spy Who Came in from the Cold." The London Sunday Times dubbed Deighton "the poet of the spy story."

I first read this book in paperback some 30-plus years ago and still have the copy; Raymond Hawkey's starkly brilliant, orange-and-white-striped cover, though now slightly faded, is still a dramatic frame for the black-and-white half-tone photo of Michael Caine as the bespectacled, Sten gun-toting Harry Palmer. One of that edition's other blurbs--from Life magazine--has also stayed with me for years: "Next, big soft girls will read Len Deighton aloud in jazz workshops." If ever any blurb was to be envied, it's surely that one.

Similarly etched in my mind, is one of this novel's several epigraphs that hint at how the realpolitik of the spy's secret world inevitably casts its shadows into our own:

“If I am right the Germans will say I was a German and the French will say I was a Jew; if I am wrong the Germans will say I was a Jew and the French will say I was a German.”--Albert Einstein

Not a single word wasted--dialogue, footnote, appendix, epigraph, epigram--all is germane to the matter. I would urge you to read Funeral in Berlin at least once before you die.