

BOOKENDS

The Hilliker Curse



By now, the crucial details of James Ellroy's life, particularly the unsolved murder of his mother when he was ten years old, may be known better than his books. He emphasised the connection himself when *The Black Dahlia*, based on a more famous unsolved murder, became a bestseller, constructing a 'demon dog' persona to promote the novels which followed. Finally, in his memoir, *My Dark Places*, Ellroy investigated his mother's death, and seemingly offered her a benediction, but as he said 'closure is a preposterous concept'.

He had rejected his mother before she met her end, preferring his slick but shallow father's indulgence. This youthful cruelty is the root of the Hilliker (his mother's maiden name) Curse. Through two marriages and countless fantasies, he now traces an intense adolescent romanticism, his need to protect women. He sees himself getting what he wants, then discarding it, paying huge psychic costs. What this reveals is the immense strain of having 'over-sold himself to the world'; the impossibility of being true to both his public persona and his inner romantic.

'My books felt like film noir', Ellroy says, but his women aren't femme fatales, nor is he the slightly stupid lug such women manipulate. One of his LA cop friends once explained him by saying that as a child his 'eyes saw more than his soul could take'. *The Hilliker Curse* (Heinemann, £16) traces a boy's attempts to embrace that soul by finding its soul-mate, but the prospect of such closure seems, if not preposterous, elusive.

— Michael Carlson

Innocents abroad
Andrew Taylor

Our Kind of Traitor

by John le Carré
Viking, £18.99, pp. 306,
ISBN 9780670919017

In John le Carré's fiction, personal morality collides messily with the grimly cynical expediencies of global politics. Loyalty is never something to take for granted. That is the issue at the heart of his new novel, his 22nd, as it is in so many of his other ones.

The plot centres on a pair of innocents abroad, both literally and figuratively — Perry, a left-leaning Oxford don who yearns to replace the dreaming spires with what he thinks of as real life; and his girlfriend, Gail, a young barrister hesitating between her career and the possibility of six children with Perry. A holiday in Antigua leads to life-changing decisions they hadn't anticipated. Perry — a gifted amateur tennis player — plays a match with Dima, a neighbouring Russian tycoon, whose entourage includes an extended family and a bodyguard named Uncle Vanya.

Perry's sense of fair play so impresses his opponent that Dima, perhaps a little improbably, decides to use Perry as his go-between with the British secret service. For Dima is in fact the world's 'number-one money-launderer', as well as a murderous career criminal. Now he wants to liquidate his assets, settle in the UK and send his sons to Eton and his daughter to Roedean (if Eton cannot be persuaded to stretch a point and take girls). Dima's one problem is that, once he liquidates his assets, his former associates will liquidate him. So he proposes a deal: if MI6 will guarantee him a safe haven, he will spill the rotten beans about what turns out to be an enormously lucrative deal involving Russian mafiosi, venal MPs, City moghuls, the solvency of the British nation and sinister Surrey oligarchs.

So far, so good. And then of course everything goes wrong for just about everybody. Perry and Gail are forced to confront their own limitations, as well as those at the heart of the British establishment, while trying to keep Dima and his unhappy family out of harm's way. The novel ends, rather abruptly, with a dying fall.

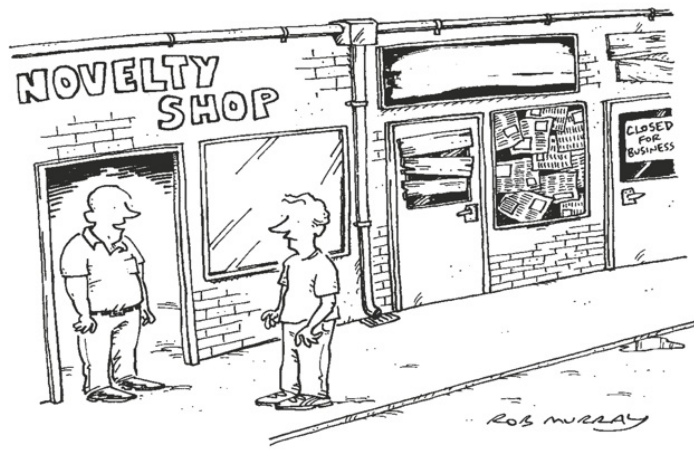
Le Carré gives us the flattering illusion that we are eavesdropping at the spooks' top table. His themes — money-laundering, the long consequences of the recession and the need for hard choices — are nothing if not topical. He is a skilled observer of how people interact.

For all that, the novel belongs on le Carré's B-list. Though Dima and his entourage are both poignant and surprisingly funny, Perry and Gail are a little too glossy to be sympathetic or even believable. Their idiom is curiously old-fashioned: Perry (aged 30) lives in 'digs', and wears what the rather younger Gail

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refers to, without a trace of irony, as his 'grey bags' on his lower limbs. They both appear to have perfect recall, which comes in handy when they are unburdening themselves to their MI6 minders. Nor is the narrative as smooth and streamlined as it might be; it lurches to and fro in time and place, which sometimes confuses as much as it intrigues.

That said, perhaps part of the problem has more to do with us than with le Carré. This novel isn't Smiley and it isn't the Cold War, either; and many of his readers have an irrational nostalgia for both. Le Carré deserves credit for trying to move with the times. Yet somehow the result doesn't seem to matter enough: money-laundering certainly has its moments, but it's a long way from the Great Game. Ⓢ



'The novelty is we haven't closed down yet.'