

Programme Notes



Monday 13th November 19:30

The Pigeon Tunnel (12A)



Filmed just before his death in 2020, Errol Morris' film explores the life of David Cornwell, better known as John le Carré.

The film's title comes from Cornwell's memoir *The Pigeon Tunnel: Stories From My Life*. Incredibly, the title comes from a hotel Cornwell visited with his father Ronnie in the south of France. Pigeons were bred on the roof of the hotel and then forced through a tunnel towards the shore where they would be shot by the great and the good who were waiting for them! As a

metaphor, it describes the world Cornwell was to inhabit in both his life as a spy and in his spy fiction.

Morris explores how Cornwell's life influenced the work of le Carré and vice versa. This includes Cornwell's difficult relationship with his conman father: it is of no surprise that Cornwell found himself first employed as a spy and then secondly taking up his pen to write about spies. Morris tells us that he is fascinated by betrayal and looks to explore how a line can be drawn between Cornwell's father and the novels that Cornwell ended up writing.

Reviews

*It's clear that either Morris, Cornwell, or both chose the terms of the interview of *The Pigeon Tunnel* before they sat down. The direct focus on Ronnie and the concepts that conversation unearths—betrayal, subterfuge, greed, etc—might frustrate some people who want a bigger picture look at le Carré's work. That's not what these brilliant gentlemen are going for with this film. It's almost more like a companion to some of the most popular books of all time—not an explainer or even piece of historical trivia about their execution. Instead, this documentary reveals how even the most complex spy fiction can have a foundation in the relationship between a son and his father.*

Brian Tallerico, October 20, 2023, rogerebert.com

Errol Morris's interview with David Cornwell, deferential and unthreatening as it is, provides another example of a great truth in documentaries that the simple spectacle of clever people talking on camera is as gripping as any thriller.

Peter Bradshaw, September 2023, The Guardian

The film was originally to be a series, and there are many points where whole episodes suggest themselves. But the best directors are pragmatists, and with time against him, Morris strips the narrative back while creating an elegant dovetail. Here we have the frauds of Ronnie Cornwell; and here the streak of fabulation in so much of the Cold War. [Cornwell] often plays the breezy cynic, but Morris gets to his real fury at the hack theatre of it all. The tribute Morris pays [Cornwell] is to make a film of ideas: a grand tour of unreliable childhood memories, and still more slippery adult truths.

Danny Leigh, October 19 2023, Financial Times

The Pigeon Tunnel is an absorbing, colourful self-portrait. I say 'self' because, although Morris, as the filmmaker, doubtless made the many decisions that go into the composition of the portrait, the broad outlines are manifestly dictated by Cornwell as he talks onscreen. Morris intervenes both too little and too much, but the movie somehow still hits a sweet spot.

Richard Brody, New Yorker, October 2023

Cast

Jake Dove	Teenage David Cornwell
Charlotte Hamblin	Olive Cornwell
Garry Cooper	Ronnie Cornwell
Simon Harrison	Kim Philby

Credits

Director	Errol Morris
Writer	Errol Morris, John Le Carré
Producers	Simon & Stephen Cornwell
Editor	Steven Hathaway
Music	Philip Glass, Paul Leonard-Morgan
Camera	Igor Martinovic
Country	USA
Running time	92 minutes

Film Facts

In the film Cornwell tells many stories about his grotesque father, a man who literally asked for payment for services rendered as his parent once he knew his son could afford it. Cornwell says of his father, *"Whether he believed in God is mysterious, but he was certain God believed in him!"*

In another story, Cornwell recalls being sent, as a boy, to a racetrack—the bookies had barred his father on pain of violence—with a suitcase full of cash to be distributed among creditors and coming back with a suitcase full of fresh winnings.

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