

# The physician at the movies

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## Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy

Starring Gary Oldman, Mark Strong, Colin Firth, and Tom Hardy.

Directed by Tomas Alfredson. Rated R. Running time 130 minutes.

Most readers are probably familiar with John Le Carre who wrote the book on which this movie is based.<sup>1</sup> Le Carre (aka David Cornwell) was a member of the British foreign service from 1959 to 1964. He has written twenty-one novels, the best-known of which is *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold*. The latter was made into a movie, as were seven others including *The Constant Gardener*, *The Russia House*, and *The Little Drummer Girl*. His best books concern the intrigues inside the British intelligence service MI-6 during the Cold War, when MI-6 was sparring with the intelligence services of the Soviet Union, East Germany, and even the United States.

The movie principally deals with the existence within MI-6 of a highly placed mole or double agent turned by the Russian spymaster Karla, and the attempt to discover his identity. Not having read the book nor watched the acclaimed BBC miniseries, I had some difficulty getting into the movie. There are many threads to the story, which the director introduces in fragments before hopping to another one in flashbacks. In addition, the central character, George Smiley (Gary Oldman), says very little for the first twenty minutes of the film, and, when he does, he is very laconic. I finally did figure out what was going on and came away accepting that it was a thinking person's movie and worth seeing, especially given the dearth of films that tell stories and engage the viewer. In addition, it led me, as I will note later, to sample the various other forms in which the story has been told.

The film opens in 1973 with the Cold War in full force. Britain's Secret Service MI-6, codenamed "The Circus" for its fictional location in a nondescript building on Cambridge Circus, has been suffering reverses, with agents in foreign countries being exposed, and secrets being leaked to Moscow and other enemies. The spymaster nicknamed Control (John Hurt) suspects a mole at MI-6's highest level, in the person of one of his top five underlings. Told that there is a Hungarian general who wishes to defect and who knows the identity of the mole, he sends for agent Jim Prideaux (Mark Strong), who is familiar with Hungary and who has been away from the Circus during the period when the mole is suspected of having operated. Prideaux is instructed to send back a cable after meeting with the general, identifying the mole using one of five code names assigned to them. The assignment is drawn from a popular English children's fortune-telling rhyme used when presumably



From left, Gary Oldman and John Hurt in *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy* (2011). Focus Features/Photofest.

counting cherry stones, waistcoat buttons, daisy petals or the seeds of timothy grass:<sup>1</sup> Tinker, Percy Alleline (Toby Jones); Tailor, Bill Haydon (Colin Firth); Soldier, Roy Bland (Ciaran Hinds); Sailor; Rich Man; Poor Man, Toby Esterhase (David Denesic); Beggarman, George Smiley; Thief. He skips Sailor because it is too close to Tailor and Rich Man because agent Esterhase is always complaining of being underappreciated, thus Poor Man.

The mission goes badly and Prideaux is shot twice in the back. Although originally thought to be dead, he is later tortured by Russian superspy Karla in an attempt to reveal the Hungarian spy network and to determine who else in the Circus knows of his operation. Prideaux will reappear in England teaching in a Boy's Prep School (one of the many enigmas in the story). London is notified about the capture of a British spy and the mission is hastily covered up. Control is replaced as being over the hill and because his suspicions are considered outlandish, and his trusted lieutenant George Smiley is sacked. The rest of the film deals with Smiley being rehired by the undersecretary who supervises MI-6 when it becomes clear through rogue agent Ricki Tarr (Tom Hardy) that the mole does exist. Smiley is assigned the job of ferretting out the mole with the help of Peter Guillam (Benedict





Mark Strong in *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy* (2011). Focus Features/Photofest.

Cumberbatch), a loyal lieutenant whom Smiley had recruited into the service.

Mix in another thread with the Istanbul-based Tarr falling in love with a Russian spy who knows the mole's name but will only reveal it to Percy Alleline, the new head of the Circus. Tarr cables the information to London, setting into motion another betrayal (the real theme of the film). Smiley methodically and surreptitiously works to discover the traitor. Another thread involves the existence of an operation kept secret outside the Circus called "Witchcraft" and controlled by the mole who passes on to England a mixture of low level accurate information and bogus disinformation while funneling secrets to Merlin, the code name of a Russian Embassy operative who all but the mole consider to have been turned, but is loyal to Moscow.

The film is full of lots of walking to and fro, which I would have preferred to have been replaced by making the story more transparent. There is one scene with a plane in the background that I found difficult to understand, as Smiley and Guillam grill Esterhase who is not believed to be the mole. The miniseries handled that scene much better.

In all the presentations of the story, a mostly unseen character is often mentioned, namely George Smiley's estranged wife, with whom he is still in love despite the fact that she notoriously sleeps around. It apparently fuels feelings of inadequacy as a husband in Smiley and explains his withdrawn nature. A lighter she gave him also figures in the story when Karla, whom

Smiley had been assigned to turn early in his career, is allowed to keep it before returning to Moscow. The most incongruous scene involved a drunken Christmas party that the director inserted using as background music "La Mer," sung by Julio Iglesias. A particular favorite of mine written during World War II by Charles Trenet, his classic version of the song was used to great effect and much more appropriately in the film *Mr. Bean's Holiday*. The director liked it too, and decided that the party conveyed all that MI-6 was not, fun and camaraderie.

Since I am addicted these days to audiobooks, I decided to learn more about the story by trying to find one, but could only locate a BBC radio adaptation that ran about three hours with repetitive credits, somewhat longer than the movie but actually quite similar to it in presentation.<sup>2</sup> Then I watched the 1979 miniseries that ran on three discs of 108 minutes each.<sup>3</sup> This much more robust presentation of the story is the most satisfying audiovisual rendition of the book, not just because it stars Alec Guinness as George Smiley, but because the extra time allows the story to be better-paced and more comprehensible. If you have the time, I recommend watching it. Still, Gary Oldman, who has been nominated for an Academy Award for Best Actor, does a great job of channeling Alec Guinness and the film is certainly worth a rental. If you want to view a more lighthearted and entertaining movie about spies, I strongly recommend *Hopscotch*, starring Walter Matthau and Glenda Jackson. It's a hoot.

Addendum: In an excellent twenty-eight-minute 2002

interview that is part of the miniseries on DVD, Le Carre has some fascinating insights into Alec Guinness's approach to acting (look for him doing the simple action of putting on a glove or walking in a meadow). He also discusses how his personal life led to a career both in intelligence work and writing, as well as how the story has historic resonance. The existence of highly placed double agents was known even before the Soviet Union imploded and KGB files were made public. Agents didn't always report that they suspected that someone was a mole because they could monitor them and for fear that the press would get wind of it; they were less worried of it being discovered by Moscow than by the press.<sup>4</sup>

Le Carre also comments on the changing nature of the class structure in England that had contributed to a greater loyalty to one's class. The intelligence service was mostly comprised of people who had studied at Eton, Oxford, and Cambridge and were in the upper tier of society. They started out very idealistic but often became cynical, especially as the British Empire disintegrated after World War II, taking with it the whole idea of Britannia ruling the waves, the sun never setting on the British Empire, and doing things for King and Country. Indeed, in the film, the mole mentions this disillusionment after his discovery as being a factor in why he turned traitor.

### References

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## Moneyball

**Starring Brad Pitt, Jonah Hill, Philip Seymour Hoffman, Kerris Dorsey and Robin Wright.**

**Directed by Bennett Miller. Rated PG-13. Running time 133 minutes.**

*Moneyball* is the most entertaining film I've seen in a long time. Based on the book by Michael Lewis,<sup>1</sup> the story centers on the innovations introduced by Oakland A's general manager Billy Beane in constructing his baseball team. He took a team that had the second lowest payroll and whose clubhouse Lewis described as "the cheapest and least charming real estate in professional baseball,"<sup>2</sup> and melded it into one that won twenty consecutive games on its way to 103 wins. You don't have to be a sports fan to enjoy the film, largely due to the crackling dialogue and the Academy Award nominated performance of Brad Pitt. He is in almost every scene and his interactions with the players, scouts, executives, manager, and, most especially, Paul Brand (Jonah Hill), the Yale-trained economist he hires as a special assistant, are pitch-perfect. The

real assistant whose ideas Beane took a chance on implementing was Paul De Podesta, actually a Harvard graduate whose persona was wonderfully fictionalized. Thinking he was being portrayed too much as a nerd, he asked that his name not be used, but he helped with the film.<sup>3</sup> Hill, who also received an Academy Award nomination, plays him with great timing, facial expressions, and comebacks that make the scenes with him and Pitt a joy to watch. Their remarkably collaborative interaction generates humor while moving the story along.

The story is set in 2002, a time when baseball fans and sports media, especially ESPN, were obsessed with home runs and the distance they traveled, as well as the signing of free-agent players with big salaries. In charge of a small-market team, Beane began applying what has come to be called sabermetrics, developed by William James, a more mundane statistical analysis of players' contributions to winning baseball. It put a lot of emphasis on on-base percentage, assuming that the more you got on base the more likely you were to be batted in. It also encouraged players to take more pitches, not only to see the starters' entire repertoire and possibly get a better pitch to hit, but also to increase the pitch count and thus get into the bullpen sooner. Beane made enemies of veteran scouts and executives by downgrading the role in player evaluation of a scout's intuition and a player's physique. As he said, "We're not selling jeans." In addition to relying on objective criteria, not just eyeballs, he emphasized dedication to the team concept rather than on individual prima donna attitudes.

One might think that a film lauding an efficiency expert and statistics would be boring, but this one isn't. Like the original 1950 version of *Cheaper by the Dozen* with Clifton Webb, also about an efficiency expert, humor and humanity are woven into the film. This is seen not just in the interactions with the manager Art Howe (Philip Seymour Hoffman), players, scouts, and Brand, but also in the interweaving of Beane's personal story. Growing up in a middle-class suburban San Diego neighborhood, he was a heavily recruited high school football and baseball player and was offered a scholarship at Stanford and a tryout with the New York Mets. Deciding to join the Mets in 1980 and to forgo college, his dreams of stardom were never fulfilled, as is shown in flashbacks. Thus, this job offered him an opportunity for redemption and recognition in the baseball world. The most touching parts of the film are those scenes that focus on the relationship between the divorced Beane and his daughter Casey (Kerris Dorsey), and in part with his ex-wife Sharon (Robin Wright). The film ends somewhat on a high note with the A's coming back to win a playoff game, while he connects in a very poignant way with his daughter. Still, the director makes it clear that his was not a storybook ending.

Like many Hollywood biopics, which are primarily entertainment and not documentaries meant to convey historic truths, this one has had its detractors. First of all, they point out that it doesn't give credit to the pitching, which in the end really wins world championships.<sup>4</sup> Having three bona



Brad Pitt in Moneyball (2011). © Columbia Pictures.

vide number one pitchers on the staff played as large a role or maybe more than the statistical methods in reversing the fortunes of the team. Second, Art Howe, who is thin and laid-back as opposed to the paunchy Hoffman who plays him as uniformly stubborn and negative, is livid about his portrayal. Howe is widely recognized as a brilliant manager and the A's wouldn't have won 103 games had he not been creative.

Third, though his methods were innovative, Beane was not the first to use the new statistics and he has never won a world championship. Indeed he did have an opportunity to move to the Red Sox to use his sabermetrics but refused the offer; the Red Sox made Theo Epstein the general manager. Epstein hired William James, and using the same methods with more money at his disposal, he was able to win a World Series in 2004 for the first time since 1918, ending the curse of the Bambino. The Red Sox had never won a World Series since trading Babe Ruth to the Yankees for \$100,000 at the end of the 1919 season, a move that has gone down as the worst trade in baseball history. Finally, it's worth noting that a large part of the success of sabermetrics was due to the revolution in computers that

made statistical analysis commonplace to the point where it's gotten ridiculous, as one can see in the *Wall Street Journal's* section on sports.<sup>5</sup>

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