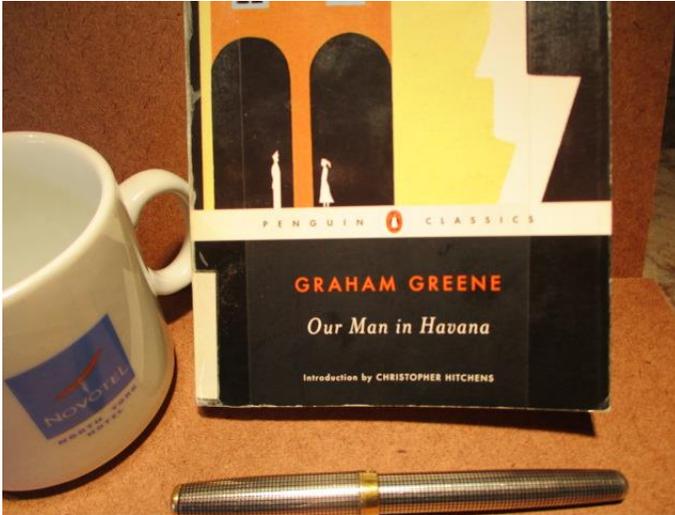


# Our Man in Havana

By Rod Fraser

---



Here is a short novel I recommend. A critic by the name of Richard Jones said of Greene's writing, "nothing [keeps him] from the main business of holding the readers' attention."

Quite so. *Our Man in Havana* (228 pages) has an amusing and intelligent plot and is one of the most readable books I've read in the past year or so. All those who enjoy a spy story and possess a sense of humor will benefit from reading this book.

To get an idea of Greene's amusing charm and singularity, Wikipedia tells the story of a contest run

by the *New Statesman* in 1949. The idea was to encourage writers to submit "parodies of Greene's writing style". When Greene heard about it, "he submitted an entry under the name of N. Wilkinson and won second prize."

Graham Greene (1904–1991) grew up in rural England in an influential family. His father was a teacher at a boarding school (and later headmaster). This is where Greene received his early education.

Later he attended Balliol College at Oxford to study history. When he graduated, he earned his living as a tutor for a time, and then turned to journalism. He was lucky with the time of his birth; by just a few years, he escaped military service and the horrors of the First World War.

His first novel was published in 1929 and enjoyed some success. It was followed by two others that did not do as well. His first commercial success was a novel called *Stamboul Train*, published in 1932. It was later made into a film.

From there, Greene didn't look back. By mid-century, he was considered one of Britain's finest writers.



Here is an amusing anecdote from his editor (and friend), Michael Korda.

*Greene wrote his novels in "a black leather notebook with a black fountain pen". Each day he wrote 500 words. "When he reached 500, he would put his pen away and finished for the day." Greene was a disciplined writer and sufficiently confident that his "daily penance" would ultimately lead to another successful novel.*

During the Second World War, Greene was an intelligence officer for MI6. As part of his work, he learned that German intelligence officers in Portugal were sending fabricated reports to Berlin, in order to claim additional expenses and bonuses. It was this little tidbit of information that gave him the idea for this novel, *Our Man in Havana*.

It is a great story. The novel was made into a film in 1959 starring Alec Guinness, Maureen O'Hara, Burl Ives, Noel Coward and Ernie Kovacs. It was a success at the box office, but it didn't win any film awards or nominations.

I liked the movie, but it wasn't as interesting as the book. It didn't capture the magic—the subtle humor and wonderful writing. For those who are tempted: by all means watch the film. But be sure to read the book.



*Our Man in Havana* tells the story of James Wormold, a small businessman in pre-revolutionary Cuba.

Wormold is British by birth, and earns his living in a small shop in Havana, selling vacuum cleaners.

Business is not good, because of intermittent power outages in the city. And his teenage daughter, Milly, is outspending his meagre income. Wormold is desperate for cash and concerned about his financial future.

As luck would have it, one day, a Mr. Hawthorne of the British Secret Service shows up at his shop, and recruits Wormold as a British spy. He becomes their 'Man in Havana'.

Wormold's job is to recruit sub-agents, learn what is going on in Cuba and advise Hawthorne of his findings. He is paid handsomely for his efforts.

Since Wormold knows no one of importance in Havana, he invents imaginary agents, using the names of men he barely knows. He files reports to the Secret Service of information he has culled from public records or has otherwise invented.

Soon he is collecting salary, bonuses and expenses for a number of imaginary operatives, and is busy each night filing reports to Hawthorne. As his reputation in London increases, he is pressed for more and better information.

Wormold tells London of a secret construction site in the mountains and provides drawings to show it contains a secret weapon. To provide evidence for

this new weapon, Wormold conjures up a large-scale sketch of his latest Atomic Vacuum Cleaner.

This secret weapon causes great concern in London. Wormold's staff is increased to include a secretary (Beatrice Severn) and a radio operator (codenamed 'C'). At this point, the plot becomes more complicated.

Not only has Wormold deceived the British Secret Service, but he has also duped the enemy (the Soviets are the likely choice, but it is never clearly stated). They surreptitiously gain access to his reports, consider him a major threat and plan to destroy his agent network.

One of his so-called agents is killed in a car crash. And London soon discovers the enemy plan to poison Wormold at a trade association luncheon. He hilariously avoids injury. Then Wormold and Beatrice work to save the other so-called agents whose lives are in peril.

As you might imagine, Wormold's scheme collapses under its own weight. He confesses all to Beatrice who reports him to London. When he is called to account, he finds the Secret Service would rather not admit the embarrassing truth. Their gullibility and ham-fistedness would be known to the wider political world. Who knows what could happen to their careers and large budgets?

To keep him silent, the files are sealed and Wormold is offered a teaching position with MI6. He is to receive the *Order of the British Empire*. His signing of the Official Secrets Act will ensure the ugly truth will never be known.

The story ends with Wormold's daughter, Milly, planning to attend a Swiss finishing school, financed with her father's ill-gotten gains. Wormold takes up his teaching position and proposes marriage to Beatrice. She happily agrees and I expect they live happily ever after.

I plan to read another of Graham Greene's novels in the near future. I have ordered *The Third Man* from Amazon and it is expected to arrive next week. You will be sure to learn my opinion of this famous book in future months.

September 15, 2019