



The Spy

James Fenimore Cooper , Wayne Franklin (Annotations)

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A historical adventure reminiscent of Sir Walter Scott's Waverley romances, Cooper's novel centers on Harvey Birch, a common man suspected of being a spy for the British.

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The Spy Details

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Author : James Fenimore Cooper , Wayne Franklin (Annotations)

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Bettie? says

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Harvey Birch Burn Gorman
Frances Rose Leslie
Henry Alex Waldmann
Mr Wharton James Lailey
Sarah Francine Chamberlain
Mr Harper Timothy Watson
Caesar Richard Pepple Peyton
Dunwoodie Simon Bubb
Captain Lawton Gerard McDermott
Colonel Wellmere Adam Billington
Isabella Singleton Victoria Inez Hardy

Directed by Sasha Yevtushenko. Dramatised by DJ Britton.

Team: Studio managers: Anne Bunting, Jenni Burnett, Alison Craig. Editor: Anne Bunting Production Co-ordinator: Beverly Tagg

blurb - Published in 1821, The Spy was the first commercially successful American work of popular fiction. On top of that, it is also generally regarded as the world's first espionage novel. Until Fenimore Cooper, spies in fiction had been villains, the lowest of the low. But in creating Harvey Birch (played here by Burn Gorman), a double agent during the American War of Independence, Cooper began the tradition of spy-as-hero, leading to the great genre novels of the late 19th and 20th centuries.

Set in Westchester County, New York State, in 1778, we meet Harvey Birch, a mysterious pedlar, when he turns up unexpectedly at The Locusts, a house in no-man's-land between British and American forces, owned by the wealthy Wharton family. The Whartons are a family of divided loyalties: one of the daughters, Frances, is engaged to an American officer. The other, Sarah, is a romantic royalist. Birch who, with his father, lives in a small house nearby is, it is rumoured, a double agent and both sides have put a price on his head. His house has been attacked by British forces, and Birch has been forced to take to the dangerous road...

Travelling on foot with his salesman's pack on his back, Birch appears to steer clear of political or military allegiances, trading with both sides. Yet whenever the honour and the safety of decent people is in danger, Birch is at hand. He suffers appalling indignities, is robbed, burnt out of his home by the terrifying Skinners - American outlaws posing as Patriot irregulars - and is sentenced to death by the American forces. He never uses his privileged position to save his own skin, for, only at the very end of the story is it revealed, that he has a personal commission - from George Washington himself.

Gabriellyn says

What an amazing story. A beautiful testament to the life of the man who was Harvey Birch. (RTC, maybe.)

Werner says

My current reading of *The Deerslayer* has turned my attention to works by Cooper that I've read already, a couple of which I haven't reviewed here before now. Published in 1821, *The Spy* was only Cooper's second novel, and the first to be much a literary success; set mainly during the Revolutionary War (in 1780, to be exact --Cooper himself was born in 1789), it also marked his first foray into historical fiction. It's very much the production of a fledgling writer still developing his craft; it doesn't have even as much technical proficiency as *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826), nor as matured a moral sensibility in some areas. I've read it twice (the first time was as a kid), but that's primarily because, when I was homeschooling our daughters, I felt that my memory of it needed a refresher.

Set in Cooper's native state of New York, the subtitle of this book is "A Tale of the Neutral Ground." The area referred to is the "no man's land" between New York City and its immediate environs, held by the British, and the American positions further up the Hudson, where they held their line defending the approaches to Albany. Villagers and landowners between the two might be exposed to the raiding parties of both sides --neither of whom were always scrupulous about respecting civilian life and property-- and to collateral damage in any battles between elements of the two armies. Not surprisingly, it was also a hotbed for guerillas and spies. Loyalties in the area were mixed; of all the thirteen colonies, New York had the highest proportion of Loyalists, or Tories (and was actually the only one of the thirteen to furnish more men for the British army than for the American one!). All of these conditions are faithfully reflected in the novel.

Our protagonist here is young landowner Harvey Birch, a secretive fellow without a family, whose farm suffers much neglect in the course of his mysterious comings and goings. He's generally thought by his neighbors to be a spy --the question is, for which side? (And Cooper will enlighten us on that score only in his own good time.) But we're also soon introduced to his wealthy Tory neighbors, the Whartons, who early on welcome the family's heir, Captain Henry Wharton of the British Army, who's visiting them in disguise. (He's genuinely NOT a spy --but the fact that he's out of uniform could get him hanged as one, if he happens to be captured by the Americans.) In the course of the book, we also meet George Washington (whom Cooper portrays as more involved in hands-on intelligence gathering, and more prone to travel around in disguise, than he probably actually was). Some other engaging characters populate the novel as well, and the author does deliver a plot with considerable action and intrigue. Also on the positive side, he does not demonize the British and their sympathizers; one despicable villain here is British, but he earns the contempt of the other Brits, to their credit, and the American guerillas in the area don't earn any plaudits for good behavior, either.

Cooper's style here is typical of the Romantic school of that day; his syntax is often convoluted, he's got a big vocabulary that includes plenty of long words that he's not afraid of using, and he has a very deliberate mode of storytelling. But I don't consider any of these aspects of early 19th-century diction to be faults as such, and I actually didn't think the dialogue was as unrealistically ornate as it sometimes becomes in *The Last of the Mohicans* (the latter was actually the only Cooper work I've read so far where I had a real problem with the style). There are no real moral conflicts or choices here that face the characters and cause them to grow. Despite the opportunities for dialogue between the partisans of popular democracy and of

aristocratic monarchy, these are mostly ignored; this is not really a novel that explores the ideology of the American Revolution. Readers should be warned that tragic events are a staple of Romantic fiction; and the final chapter, which is projected 33 years into the characters' future, during the War of 1812, to tell us what became of several of them, relies implausibly on a lot of coincidence, and could better have been left out, IMO. Racial insensitivity towards blacks also mars this work; Harvey uses the n-word, and while Cooper's treatment of Mr. Wharton's slave Caesar is in the main positive and sympathetic, he couldn't resist "humorously" implying that a fall on his head couldn't hurt him much. (The humor doesn't succeed, to put it mildly.) By 1826, the author's recognition of non-whites as equal parts of the human race had advanced significantly; but at this point, he still had quite a ways to go.

For readers interested in the fiction of this period, or in Cooper's work in general. this novel is worth reading; and it's not without its rewards in its own right. But it doesn't deserve more than three stars in my estimation, and I wouldn't suggest it as a first introduction to Cooper's novels.

Henry Avila says

The neutral ground, Westchester County, just north of the British held New York City, time 1780, the American Revolution is in its 5th year, but the endless conflict continues, cavalry patrols by both sides keep the blood flowing, irregulars, the skimmers for the U.S. and cow-boys, their opposite number, for England, do much burning, killing and looting, essentially common criminals, but with a pretense for the cause, doesn't matter which side. Harvey Birch, peddler, suspected spy for the King, is wanted by the Continental Army, to be hanged if captured, he has mysteriously escaped twice from custody. The ironic reality is that Mr. Birch, is a patriot, working secretly for George Washington, as an observer, giving the commander-in-chief valuable information. British Major Andre has just been executed, conspired with Benedict Arnold, tensions are high. The prosperous, loyalist family of Mr. Wharton lives in the area, a neighbor of Mr. Birch, professing neutrality, but with a son, Henry, a captain in the British army. Unwisely coming in disguise, to visit his father, sisters, Sarah and Frances and Aunt Janette. Already another traveler Mr. Harper, an impressive gentleman, escaping a furious rainstorm, is staying there, but who is he? The faithful black servant, Caesar, manages the house. When the American patrol (the cavalry is little used by the combatants, in this war, because of the bad terrain), fighting their enemy, stops to rest, the wounded to be nursed by the lovely ladies, (the dead buried), at the mansion, the captain is discovered. Hanging seems inevitable but Major Dunwoodie, leader of the group falls in love with Frances, how can she be connected with the major, when her beloved brother is to be executed. And what about her sister Sarah, a loyalist unlike her younger sister, how will she feel? Then more complications, the dishonorable English Colonel Wellmere, a POW, asks the trusting Sarah to marry him, not telling her, he has another wife across the wide Atlantic Ocean, in distant England !... Dr. Sitgreaves, a talkative surgeon for the Americans, has helped many soldiers to recover their health, a somewhat cantankerous but able man, who likes to dissect dead bodies for science he says, the good doctor needs undamaged corpses. Always urging the horsemen to slash carefully with their swords, not to cause too much mutilation, to the victims. The Skinners burned down Harvey's small house, with his father on his death bed, but before expiring gets up and scares the looters, from the premises, his ghastly face seems inhuman, a specter, saving the peddler ... Later moved to the headquarters of the Continental Army, Henry Wharton, the captain has a short period to live until tomorrow, convicted of espionage by a Court-Martial, his family visiting him, but a strange unbending clergyman, hated by everyone, also arrives to give final spiritual comfort. But in fact is Harvey Birch, master at disguises, also Caesar, there, can they free the doom captain? The first important American novel, 1821, that is still read today.

Alicea says

It's important to remember the time period that a book was written in when delving into a work of classical literature. For example, *The Spy* came out in 1821 when American novelists were still focused on telling stories about their brethren over the pond. It was quite revolutionary (pun sooo intended) to focus a story on American soil. The story is set during the American Revolution and opens at the end of 1780. Slavery clearly still practiced and attitudes about the slaves themselves were not altogether complimentary. If you go into a work of classic literature without remembering the context of the story itself then you are doomed to find the entire body of work unpalatable. With that being said, I must say I really enjoyed *The Spy*. True to the style of the time there was a lot of focus on unimportant details which made a majority of the tale drag on somewhat. I felt that it didn't really pick up steam (or grab my interest) until about 3/4 of the way through. There are two fantastic characters, however, which kept me turning those pages: Captain John Lawton (of the Continental Army who is fierce, brave, and impetuous) and Harvey Birch (the spy himself who is always full of wit and intensity). These two indomitable spirits are what make this story a classic piece of American literature.

Arlene Richards says

I always wanted to read an American Classic from the time period of the American Revolution. I was quite surprised to read in the prelude that James Fenimore Cooper was not a particularly good writer. He did not write this book for public consumption but as a way of passing time productively. These comments proved to be true. I did find some of the military tactics quite unbelievable. People of wealth who declared neutrality were able to lavishly entertain both the Southern and Northern officers at the same dinner party.

Jubilee says

I put off reading this book for a while because I knew it would be an important one, and I wanted to really read it. Well, I really read it, and it was fantastic! I feel kind of numb now that it's over. It was different than I had expected. I guess I thought it would be more complicated and extensive, but it was beautiful in its simplicity. It was as if the American War for Independence was spread across Google Maps, and then you zoomed in, on just one little area, a house, or maybe a neighborhood and watched the goings on.

Dawn says

I'd really give it 3.5 stars as it was a great book. I like historical fiction and this was a painless way of learning some about the Revolutionary War. The language in it was a little hard to read and slowed me down a bit but that's probably because I like to read every word in a book. I can see why this is a classic and this is the type of book that if required to read in high school might make history more palatable. It's certainly not anymore fiction than history books are anyway.

Ron says

“The law was momentarily extinct ... and justice was administered subject to the bias of personal interests.”

Wonderful Romantic adventure “inspired by a true story” during the American Revolutionary War. Well-developed plot. Cooper’s first “hit.”

“The heart which has not become callous, soon sickens with the glory that has been purchased with a waste of human life.”

So, why hasn’t it more famous, and why wasn’t it made into a movie? Why only three stars? Because, being a very early work, it lacks the stirring storytelling for his later works. In fact, it’s awful. Twenty-five years later he was “compelled to admit there are faults so interwoven with the structure of the tale ... it would cost less to reconstruct than to repair.” The intervening years also witnessed the publication of *Memoir of Col. Benjamin Tallmadge*, which revealed much about Washington’s spy network that even Cooper didn’t know.

“A large portion of the inhabitants ... affected a neutrality they did not feel.”

The titular neutral ground is that part of Westchester County between the British lines on Manhattan and the Continental lines north of White Plains. Those who lived there were preyed on by both sides and lawless elements taking advantage of the situation.

“The law was momentarily extinct ... and justice was administered subject to the bias of personal interests.”

Pretentious vocabulary and convoluted grammar add to the reader’s burden. Why couldn’t he call the “wooden tenement of the deceased” a coffin? The text is also marred by period-appropriate stereotypes of the two warring sides, evangelical Christians, women, and blacks, even though Cooper may have been enlightened for his day.

“There are few who have not felt the seductive pleasure of making our injuries recoil on the author; and there are some who know how much sweeter it is to return good for evil.”

Quibbles: The above mentioned writing style caused modern readers to stop and re-read often. Also, though Cooper wrote of territory he lived in, some descriptions seem improbable, such as being able to see Long Island Sound and the Hudson River from a single vantage point, not to mention “a chain of sentinels from the waters of the Sound to those of the Hudson.”

“I have heard the good Mister Whitefield say that there was no distinction of color in heaven.”

Still, for the student of the American Revolution and nineteenth-century literature, the effort is rewarded. In the hands of a good script doctor, it’d make a good movie.

“Does [redacted] think I have exposed my life, and blasted my character, for money? Tell them I would not take the gold.”

Sylvia says

This book was an awesome spy novel that addressed way more complex themes and motivations than I expected, and had some very compelling characters. Definitely not a story of the glamorous spy: this spy is more the precursor of "The Spy Who Came In From the Cold" or other such reviled, tortured, unhappy characters.

Some of the prose gets tiresome, some of the ideals are simplistic, some of the characterizations are flat stereotypes. But ultimately this is a lively little plot with sympathetic characters and deeply interesting messages, both by itself and in historical context.

Christine says

[1/2 Henry Wharton creeps into no-man's land to spend an evening with his family.

2/2 Soldier Henry Wharton must stand trial as a spy. If found guilty, he will hang. (hide spoiler)]

D Dozier says

I laughed and cried. "The Spy" story is 193 years old! Even better is learning about the author. I am just getting started there are some 40 novels written by this author. Overall excellent story, good character development and "The Spy" was the author's second novel. James Fenimore Cooper is my American Jane Austen. If Jane had been a man she would have been James Fenimore Cooper. I am learning that the older books are way better than the authors of 2014. It is a pity when you think of all the advantages current authors have.

Melissa says

My absolute favorite JFC book, and one of my favorite books of all time.

Paul Parsons says

Written around 1820, this is one of James Fenimore Cooper's lesser known novels. Modern spy novels focus on the gadgets and cleverness of the spy trade. This one highlights the individual, and what it meant to be a spy in the Revolutionary War. Harvey Birch led a lonely and dangerous life, hunted by soldiers from both sides, as he worked more or less directly for George Washington. Anonymity was crucial and he ultimately refused pay, choosing to serve his country selflessly. Other humorous characters include a pompous surgeon who glories in amputations and a black servant, whom Cooper gives voice to in the slang of the day. Upon finishing the tale, I felt a little prouder to be an American.

Neil says

Who am I to review a book that was written 190 years ago? I really enjoyed the book. It's full of action, adventure and colorful characters. The hero is a master of disguise. (Fortunately for him, people in the 18th Century were easily duped by donning women's clothing and fashioning wigs out of sheep's wool.) As in most of Cooper's novels, there is an old widower who has two diametrically opposed daughters. There is also a conniving housekeeper, a happy-go-lucky slave and a circumlocutory surgeon among others. I read the 1946 "Great Illustrated Classics" edition (No, not a Classics Illustrated comic book!), which contains fascinating illustrations from 19th Century editions of the book. Part of the allure of reading an old library book is wondering who else has read it in the past 60 years and also how many years did it sit unread on the shelf until I borrowed it three weeks ago. Everyone should read more Cooper!
