



The Dark Frontier

Eric Ambler

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The Dark Frontier (1936) is Eric Ambler's first novel, about whose genesis he writes: "[...] Became press agent for film star, but soon after joined big London advertising agency as copywriter and "ideas man". During next few years wrote incessantly on variety of subjects ranging from baby food to non-ferrous alloys. Have travelled in most countries of Europe, been stranded in Marseilles and nearly drowned in the Bay of Naples. Decided, on a rainy day in Paris, to write a thriller. Result was The Dark Frontier."

Based on the development in weaponry of the year 1936, The Dark Frontier was one of the first novels to predict the invention of a nuclear bomb and its consequences. Ambler evidently had no knowledge of what producing an atomic bomb may involve (even professional physicists at the time had only a vague idea). The book makes no mention of uranium or any other radioactive material, and makes instead the assumption that setting off an atomic bomb would involve a considerable electric charge. Still, Ambler could be credited with having become aware, before many others, of this coming weapon which was to have such a profound effect on the entire world, and his depiction of scientists in a secret hideout building such a bomb could be considered a preview of the Manhattan Project - and he correctly surmised that refugees from Nazi Germany might get involved in such a project.

The Dark Frontier Details

Date : Published February 1st 1991 by Grand Central Publishing (first published 1936)

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Author : Eric Ambler

Format : Paperback

Genre : Fiction, Spy Thriller, Espionage, Mystery, Thriller, Adventure, European Literature, German Literature

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From Reader Review The Dark Frontier for online ebook

Rayrumtum says

Eric Ambler's first novel is about a fictitious and authoritarian Balkan country in which a scientist has secretly invented an atomic bomb. Written in 36, this novel forecast that developments. Arms merchants travel there to steal the invention and the government wants to use it for aggressive purposes. Trying to prevent that is an amnesiac British scientist which add a humorous touch. By no means Ambler's best but you see in it many of the elements that would mark his best.

Nigel Pinkus says

An Eric Ambler abridged graded reader with an excellent action driven story that picks you up off your feet and doesn't put you down until the final pages. You better batter down the hatches because this storm of a story won't stop until you finish it! This version was released way back in 1982, but was originally published unbelievably way way back in 1936! For anyone who doesn't know Mr. Eric Ambler, he was the 'godfather' of the modern thriller writing and is synonymous with adventure, action and suspense. Mr. Ambler brought a new degree of authenticity, realism and literacy skill to the genre that other British writers such as the likes of Le Carre, Greene and Deighton, for example, have followed. Indeed, Mr. Ambler has had such high acclaim for his books that the likes of Greene and Le Carre have praised him as "the greatest living writer of the novel of suspense" and "the well into which everybody had dipped."

As an L2 English teacher (a second language English teacher) it was awesome to see some British suspense writers of the likes of Ambler and Seymour as well as some classic literature writers such as Dickens, Pasternak, DH Lawrence and others on the level six list. It's excellent reading for some high end students where they would get to read some great thriller stories as well as some modern classics which would be otherwise almost impossible for them. Full marks to Mr. Richard Haill for his efforts in abridging and simplifying 'The Dark Frontier' to the appropriate level too. I hope the students will enjoy reading not only this book, but also the other high quality books that are on offer from level one all the way to level six because I certainly have! They are all very worthy to be on the list and as for this one, it gets four stars.

Richard says

This was a pleasant read for a number of reasons.

First, Eric Ambler is apparently considered by many espionage writers to be the founding father of the field. John le Carré (*The Spy Who Came In from the Cold*, *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy*) described him as "the source on which we all draw."

Second, in 1935 he somehow took what little was publicly known about atomic theory and realized that $E=Mc^2$ indicated that a hypothetical "atomic bomb" would be massively destructive and politically destabilizing. So he decided to take the idea and write a "political thriller" about it. In his 1989 introduction, he wrote "In 1935 I knew, theoretically, that E probably equaled Mc^2 , but could not quite accept the numerically awesome consequences of the equation. I mean, c^2 , was such a huge and weird multiplier." So

the device he conceived of as "a little larger than a Mills grenade" wasn't nearly as destructive as the multi-ton bomb actually manufactured. And, of course, he had to create the science behind his invention out of whole cloth, so it is quite anachronistic.

And third, as an anachronism, a spy thriller from before World War II is a pleasant diversion from the complexities that have emerged since then, not the least of which is the nuclear specter he somewhat predicted.

The fourth and final reason is the book itself: Ambler uses the tired plot device of amnesia in a delightful way -- perhaps it wasn't a cliché when he wrote this, but it still serves to reinforce the relative innocence of his time.

This is a book that can be read in a single long evening, and I heartily recommend it.

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Nader Elhefnawy says

Eric Ambler's career, famous for its reinvention of the spy genre, appropriately began with a spoof of the field. In this one, a physicist in need of a good vacation reads a bad thriller and after hitting his head in the course of a car accident, believes himself to be superspy Conway Carruthers – just before he is swept up in a genuine intrigue surrounding a nuclear weapons program in a small Balkan country.

The premise is hokey, and a bit after the midpoint the story seemed to me to read more like the stories it was playing off of than a parody of them, but on the whole *Dark Frontier* holds up surprisingly well, long after many of the writers he parodied (like E. Phillips Oppenheim) have passed into obscurity.

Kjkostyo says

I love Ambler ... everyone does whether they know it or not. He is the intellectual grandparent of James Bond and Rick Blaine of *Casablanca* etc etc. This is his first book, and the author hasn't quite yet found his bold feet. The hero is literally split between a couple Joe everydays and a super hero. In future books all traces of the super hero will disappear leaving only average guys to fight government conspiracies. This really needs to be updated and made a movie!

Michael says

Ambler's first novel was a parody of sorts and featured an odd but super-competent protagonist. It wasn't until he flipped the scenario upside down and portrayed a ordinary character trapped in extraordinary circumstances that he stumbled upon a formula that changed, and arguably pioneered, espionage fiction. This is not as smooth and satisfying of a read; fortunately, virtually all over his other novels fare better.

Ed Kohinke sr. says

Ambler is credited by some as the father of the modern thriller, so I wanted to go way back and read this, his very first book. It is superb! It was published in 1936--several years before the dawning of nuclear warfare--and I was amazed not only at how knowledgeable Ambler was on the science and technology of a nuclear bomb, but also at how well he wove the moral, ethical, and political sides of having The Bomb into the story. The book was such a good read that I want to read the rest of his books.

As a bonus, the copy of the book that I found--the only in our Roanoke Valley (VA) library system--was a large-print version re-printed in 1977 in England. I have long resisted reading large-print books, but this one worked just fine and convinced me that at my age (69) maybe it's time to use these versions when available! Kicking up the text size a notch on my NOOK also helps.

Gordon Kaplan says

England, 1935. Physicist Henry Barstow is on holiday when he meets the mysterious Simon Groom, a representative for an armaments manufacturer. Groom invites the professor to Ixania, a small nation-state in Eastern Europe whose weapons program threatens to destabilize the region. Only after suffering a blow to the head – which muddles his brain into believing he is Conway Carruthers, international spy – does the physicist agree to visit Ixania. Barstow, however, quickly recognizes that Groom has a more sinister agenda, and Carruthers is the only man who can stop him. Setting out to parody old-fashioned spy novels, Ambler established his trademark style in *The Dark Frontier*. *The Dark Frontier* launched Eric Ambler's five-decade career as one of the most influential thriller writers. (Description edited from the description on the back cover of the paperback edition of *The Dark Frontier*.)

The plot seemed convoluted and confusing to me, bordering almost on science fiction. Furthermore, the characters were to a great extent caricatures. Since Ambler set out to “parody old-fashioned spy stories, the convoluted plot and caricature characters were his intent.

James Love says

There are certain names synonymous with the term Thriller. Craig Thomas the creator of the Techno-thriller. Tom Clancy perfected the Techno-thriller. Robert Ludlum, David Morrell and Eric Van Lustbader the Masters of the Spy Thriller. But if it hadn't been for Eric Ambler the bar would have been set very low.

The Dark Frontier is Eric Ambler's debut. It was published in 1936. The novel follows Dr. Henry Barstow as he heads to the fictional Eastern European country of Ixania. He is the only man able to understand and determine whether or not an atomic physicist named Kassen has created a nuclear bomb.

Mark Ellis says

The father of the modern spy thriller according to Le Carré, Eric Ambler was a wonderful writer. This was his first book and is wonderfully engaging. Written in 1936, it's plot anticipates the coming nuclear age, as a slightly batty professor takes on the arms industry in a fictional Eastern European country. A little clunky in parts, as you'd expect from a first novel, it is still an excellent read. Had only read a couple of his better known stories before but now look forward to reading more.

Procyon Lotor says

Professore di fisica si crede James Bond e si comporta come tale. Una spy-story col sapore del bianco e nero alla domenica pomeriggio con arachidi, lupini e patatine. Troppo fumettistico per? e coi consueti Balcani d'epoca dove non mancano mai i Nanisha i Poveromovi? o i Stralounatou esperti delle classiche attività balcaniche: il cialtroning il complotting ed il velleitaring. Nonostante un corretto trattamento del traffico d'armi e la doverosa comparsa della misteriosa duchessa, vero mostro nicciano con tanto di discorso sintesi di "Genealogia della morale" for dummies, non si discosta dagli stereotipi. Colonna sonora The Clash - Sandinista! 2CD [c'? pero una cosa che in Ambler stupisce sempre. Scrive a met? degli anni '30 eppure che razza di bastardi fossero sovietici, nazisti, fascisti e imperialisti inglesi, l'aveva capito gi? benissimo, molto pi? di contemporanei che ancora si nascondono dietro formulette lise]

David Rickards says

The first novel from one of the first writers of detective fiction. What I thought was most interesting about this book is that it's centered around the making of an atomic bomb ... and was published in the 1930s ... when atomic bombs were still very much theory and not reality.

Thomas Oberbichler says

I really liked it. I've got to say that it wasn't the first book by Eric Ambler I read and still, it was very entertaining.

I love the psychological approach the author used in playing with different perceptions and roles in life.

For me the ending was a bit too violent, so only 4 out of 5 from me.

Still a very good read!

L Fleisig says

Long before le Carre's George Smiley and Deighton's Harry Palmer there were Eric Ambler's accidental spies. In the 1930's the loosely defined adventure/spy genre was not much advanced from the earlier works

of Erskine Childers and John Buchan Typically, Ambler would take an unassuming, unsuspecting spectator and immerse him in a world of mystery and intrigue in pre-World War II Europe. The result was a series of highly entertaining and satisfying books that many believe set the stage for the likes of le Carre, Deighton, and, most recently, Alan Furst.

Ironically perhaps, *Dark Frontier* (Ambler's first book) was not as much a departure from earlier works in the genre as much as it was a parody of those works. While reading *Dark Frontier* after having read Ambler's later stories it struck me that by this parody perhaps he sought out to destroy the genre before recreating it. A brief look at the outlines of the story lends some small weight for this assertion.

It is 1935 and Henry Barstow is an unassuming, unsuspecting English physicist on vacation in the English countryside. It is during this holiday that he happens to meet a gentleman calling himself Simon Groom who claims to be involved in the munitions industry. And does he have a tale to tell Henry. A small country in eastern or central Europe has successfully unleashed the power of the atom and is on the way toward creating an atomic bomb. (This in and of itself is an interesting plot twist as the idea of an atomic bomb seems quite prescient for an author writing in 1936). Groom tries to enlist Barstow's help in sabotaging the plans before the balance of power in the world is changed, and not likely for the better. Barstow laughs off the invitation and goes on his merry way. But soon enough he manages to bump himself on the head and after waking up in a concussed state believes that he is one Conway Carruthers, man about town and master spy. The rest of the book follows Barstow/Carruthers in a role best described as two-parts Walter Mitty and one-part Austin Powers. The result is a book that is two-parts entertaining and two-parts wholly unbelievable.

Dark Frontier is far from Ambler's best work. For him the best was yet to come. Yet at the same time it was enjoyable to read. The plotting was good (once you got over the bump-on-the head premise) and the story had enough twists and turns to keep me engaged in it. Ambler's prose can be very funny and the observations made by Carruthers as he careens from pillar to post in this eastern European quasi-police state were both funny and sometimes acerbic.

I heartily recommend this book to any fan of Ambler. Anyone who has read and enjoyed his later works will certainly derive some benefit to seeing where his writing life started in earnest. For someone new to Ambler I would not suggest you start here. I think if you start here you may not feel compelled to explore his other stories and that would be a great loss. Anyone who likes Alan Furst (amongst others should like Ambler) and I would suggest starting with any of the following, in no particular order: *A Coffin for Dimitrios*; *Epitaph for a Spy*; or *Cause for Alarm*

Darwin8u says

"...when you have been nourishing your soul on expectation, reality is apt to be disappointing."
? Eric Ambler, *The Dark Frontier*

Eric Ambler's first novel is fun, playful, energetic and absolutely revolutionary. This is the first brick in Ambler's wall of reinvention/creation for the espionage thriller. In this novel he predicted the might and seductive qualities of nuclear weapons (in the early 1930s) and parodies the entire thriller genre at the same time. 'The Dark Frontier' also plays with the dual personality/reluctant hero theme as one of the principal narrators and the protagonist of the novel is a physicist who after suffering a brain injury ends up becoming

an Über-spy. Anyway, not a superb thriller, but definitely the beginning of a great thriller career. The modern, literary spy novel owes everything to Eric Ambler's early risk taking.

David Miller says

"The Dark Frontier" is one of Ambler's first books, from 1936, and also the first Ambler I managed to finish. Of course many people like him very much, and I bought about half a dozen of his books for a half dollar each recently, so I'll have a chance to dig in more and see what I'm missing.

In this one he does play a fine post-modern riff on readers' expectations for spy novels and mysteries, and has his main character assume the persona of a dashing James Bond type. Ambler is in fact well known for his fully ordinary characters - no omni-competent all-heroic world-savers in his books. So to a certain extent it reads as the author's commentary on the state of play in suspense writing at the time.

It was a little hard to swallow the rosy depiction of a workers' revolution. In the end, thankfully it turns out to be a nationalist coup, versus a communist revolution.

Al says

I like Eric Ambler's pre-WW II espionage novels, so when I saw this at the local library book sale, I picked it up. It turns out to be his first novel, which he describes as a parody. In it, a mild-mannered professor has a car accident and is mysteriously, and temporarily, transformed into a dashing international adventurer intent on saving the world. The book reads like a standard action thriller, albeit a not very interesting one. Don't bother.

False says

The first Ambler spy thriller? Written in the 1930's and anticipating nuclear destruction, set in a fictitious Eastern Europe country, the pace is slow and more character study. There's a delicious passage where he describes the protagonist making his way through the hills and forests, following power lines, to find the hidden laboratory. The Countess could be played by anyone resembling Dita Von Teese or Bebe Neuwirth. I'll be reading more.

Pat says

I always like to read an authors first novel. This one is interesting, as it has many elements Ambler carries into later books, but is so obviously a young man's attempt. Almost funny, but also prescient and a hint of what is to come when Ambler comes into his own. The dramatic finish is just a hoot!

Barbara says

I read this because it appears that Ambler's *Epitaph for a Spy* may be an upcoming BYT group read. My library branch had this one and I thought I'd see how I like Eric Ambler's writing. I remember--very vaguely--reading *A Coffin for Dimitrios* back in high school, during a summer spent with Helen MacInnes, Dorothy L Sayers, and others.

Dark Frontier was an enjoyable read that I raced through in an afternoon. I feel a little guilty giving it 3 stars, the same rating I just gave *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. *Dark Frontier* was not great literature and must be considered what Graham Greene would have called an "entertainment." As such, it was quite good. Indeed, in many ways it reminded me of Greene's *The Ministry of Fear*. (not nearly as good, though)

One of my favorite quotes from the book was: "Ideals are the principal produce of America. That's why we had to invent salesmanship and publicity. Without them we should never have been able to make the ideals racket pay." I also liked "Patriotism in high places is another name for personal ambition, intellectual dishonesty, and avarice."
