

# Melvin Bragg interview with Len Deighton: The Lively Arts

18 December, 1977, BBC2

00:00 Titles

*Exterior shot - London street.*

**Melvyn Bragg:** Len Deighton. Len Deighton is a Londoner and, by series of true Dickensian accidents, he was brought up in this grand London square. Well, not exactly in this square but behind the square, in the mews, because his parents worked at the great house.

His life continued to follow a rather Dickensian pattern: he went from job to job, all different, but all keeping him going until he ended up an international best-selling writer. You've probably read some of his books: *The Ipcress File*, *Billion-Dollar Brain*, *Horse Under Water*, *Funeral in Berlin*, or *Bomber*, or seen them as films or at least seen them on the paperback racks up and down the country.

This is his latest book: *Fighter .... The true story of the Battle of Britain*. He now lives part of the time in Portugal, and it was there that I went to talk to him. I began with his first novel, *The Ipcress File*.

01.07

*Exterior shot - garden of Len Deighton's villa, Albufeira.*

**Len Deighton:** I went on holiday and I decided I would write a story. Most people who come to writing books have some experience of words before; I mean, they're journalists or they're writers or they have a sort of literary experience.

Well, those people sort of know some basic facts about writing books that I didn't know. For instance, they know that a book tends to be between seventy thousand and a hundred thousand words long, and they have a very good idea how many words a hundred thousand words is, the sort of body of work on which they're embarking. This is one of the reasons I believe why journalists plan to write books, but very often never get around to it, because they're intimidated by the knowledge of how much work is ahead of them.

Now I didn't know that, you see. I didn't have any idea how many words there were in a book; I didn't know how long; for all I knew, you just sat down and wrote a book and by the weekend it was ready. You see, I had absolutely no idea, so when I say to you that I started out to write *Ipcress File* as a story, I think I had no idea whether it would be a short story or a long story or a book - I don't think I embarked on it with the idea that this would be a book - and when I was halfway through it I put it aside. It was just a fun thing: I did it

for amusement, you see, I didn't really think of it as being published, I put it aside, and then when I went on holiday again next year I wrote the rest of it.

Then I came back to London ... and I was still doing drawings for a living ... and I put it in a drawer and I didn't do anything about it, well, you see, which seems to indicate to me that I didn't have a strong ambition to be a writer in that sense, you see it was a fun thing to write - I'd got a lot of fun out of writing it, it wasn't a paramount ambition I think to see it published.

But then I met a man at a party; I'm always meeting men at parties, I must have gone to a lot of parties in those days; I met a man at a party and he said he would like to see...he was a literary agent and he said...well, I was talking to him about things and I mentioned this and he said well why don't you let me have it...er...and I'll read it and if I think that it's sellable I'll take it along, and I said alright. And then eventually after being turned down at a couple of places he found a publisher who was prepared to publish it, and that was Ipress File.

But I think the nature of the book is completely self-indulgent; I mean, there's no other way, I mean it is the most self-indulgent book ever written, probably, because I did it as an exercise in self-indulgence. I didn't do it with a view to taking it to a publisher and being published.

**MB:** And you subsequently went on to sell about two million copies. A lot of people, a lot of good critics at the time when they received it spoke about its skillful structure and its taut, well-worked artful plot, and although these things are bringing to your...you can't deny the fact that it seems to be, to someone who knows nothing about that world, myself, astonishingly well researched; in your account of writing this book you never once mentioned research about spies or spy networks or anything like that. Did you do any of the work that the critics applauded you for?

**LD:** Well, it's very difficult to answer. Simply, in as much as one person's level of expertise is different to another; I mean, what I might think is common knowledge about aeroplanes you could possibly think of as extremely boring...

**MB:** Esoteric?

**LD:** You see what I mean, and the same....I might be talking to someone about football and they couldn't conceive of how little I know about football, it would be very different. And I suppose that at that time I had interested myself, I don't know for what reason, in the kind of world of espionage and the history of espionage and I did know enough about it to sort of cobble together a fairly convincing yarn, about it.

**MB:** Had you actually met any spies?

**LD:** Oh yes, several.

**MB:** When did you meet them, when you were at art college, as an air steward, as a waiter, or which particular...

**LD:** Well, I suppose that sort of depends upon what a spy is. I suppose what I should have said is that I've met a lot of people who had experiences of spying in one way or another.

That....I found that....from when I wrote Ipress File I was, during those days I would be doing drawings

06:18

*Image shown of cookstrip from The Observer*

**LD:** ...and a lot of the time I would be doing drawings for newspapers, and within my circle of friends there were quite a few reporters, and I had been a....during the time I was at art school I had been a press photographer myself, so that I....doing....during the time...my middle twenties....I was mixing with a lot of people who were in the press, and I would find I'd had access to all sorts of unprintable material, because I would be standing at a bar talking to people, and they'd say this...very interesting - we're not going to be printing this stuff, but a very interesting thing happened to me last weekend, and I found that after I'd printed Ipress File, that these same people, because they knew me, not intimately - they knew me fairly well - would come over and say, well there's something for you Len. It still happens to me a lot.

So when I say that I met a lot of people involved in spying, I think that most of the people would come to me long after they'd ceased to be involved in spying, but, er, have come up to me....people like to tell you stories, especially if they're personal experiences, or perhaps I just attract people who like to talk to me. But I found it....er....the great problem I found with writing books is throwing stuff away. I mean, the difficulty of getting material, I mean enormous amounts of....one of the reasons why I find I have to hide away in order to work is because I attract an enormous amount of material.

08.02

*Photograph of Michael Caine and Len Deighton*

**MB:** So when you were writing them did you feel that the people on Harry's side were doing something for something worth defending, did you....what did you feel about the moral issues involved?

**LD:** I have never tried to keep any philosophical continuity in the books. In fact, someone was talking to me only a month ago, and they said how interesting it was that the hero of the books gets older and changes his mind about so many things. Well, I'd never thought of the person as being the same person, but I suppose that character was right in saying that, because I do let my own, fairly experimental views come out in the books. You see....perhaps I should add something here....that I don't believe it's my role in life to tell other people how to run their lives, or to tell them how to do anything. But I think it's a legitimate thing for - even within the context of a thriller - I think it's legitimate to question the ideas that are prevalent around one.

**MB:** But on the whole your heroes aren't very self-questioning, they're more concerned with actions rather than thoughts, aren't they?

**LD:** Well, I think that's true....and I think that....erm....people who write the sort of books I write are essentially in the entertainment business and they'll be judged according to how successful they are in entertaining the reader, and anything else they want to do has to be

done in a way that is subordinate to the main task, that is entertaining the reader. And I think that the books I write are, essentially, action books, that they....people move...they do think, but they don't don't spend too many pages in thinking, if you see what I mean, they don't have to keep pace with it.

**MB:** You say that you're in the entertainment business. You're separating yourself from people you would call novelists. Is that....?

10:26

**LD:** Well, that depends how you use the word novelist. I think novelist were at one time the sort of people who wrote books that Victorian house maids took to bed at night and read. Well, I'd be very happy to be identified as a novelist in that context. But I'm afraid that the way the word is used nowadays may mean a more profound, philosophical works and I wouldn't want to frighten anyone away from a good read by attaching a label like that to anything that I do.

I mean, I had never read a James Bond book, but by an extraordinary coincidence the month - I mean, I don't know how publisher's schedules work or anything - but it happened that the month *The Ipcress File* was published was the month in which the first James Bond film appeared in the West End, and another one of my friends...I mean, you couldn't possibly be big-headed if you have the sort of friends I have....another of my friends came up to me and said 'you've been very lucky, Len, because you're the blunt instrument critics have used to bash Ian Fleming over the head.'

And this is really, I think, true; a lot of people who didn't like the sort....perhaps liked the film, but didn't like the success the film was having, were perhaps over generous to me when I came along with something which was a substantially different thing to the James Bond books, and so people were able to say now look, this is much more interesting than James Bond books, er, simply because the films were attracting enormous huge queues of people.

**MB:** In *The Ipcress File*, one of the strongest things that comes out in the dialogue....and although you might dissent....in that you call it a novel of ideas, in that the English class structure is very powerful in it. Does the English class system amuse you or depress you?

12:35

**LD:** Well, I think it amuses me more than it depresses me, because everyone seems to like it so much. It's, I find it difficult to be depressed about something which everyone enjoys so much

[Section removed due to copyright restrictions - this is images of a dramatisation of the story *It Must Have Been Two Other Fellows* produced for this film by Peter Prince, starring William Lucas as Pelling and Victor Wyndham as Ward.]

**MB:** In the collection of stories *Declarations of War* there's one story called *It Must Have Been Two Other Fellows*, which deals with class but it's sort of a double exposure because it's set in 1970, it's about a Colonel Pelling and a Corporal Ward, whose paths crossed in the war, and they're meeting twenty-five years later. The corporal's now a commercial traveller, doing very well; the Colonel's a wealthy landowner, although you wouldn't know that to look at him. Like your father the Colonel's obsessed with engines, and he's working

one Sunday in his ex-tenant's garage, and when his ex corporal, this commercial traveller, tries to buy petrol, and he makes his conclusion that the Colonel now makes his living as a petrol pump attendant. You must have enjoyed that, because it has so many cross-currents about....

**LD:** Very much

**MB:** ....the working class and the results of army service.

**LD:** And of course the distortions of memory, and the way that people remember the things that they want to remember, and the way people deal so fondly with the bits of memory they want to remember.

**MB:** What would you say were the most important facts about your childhood.

**LD:** Well, I suppose the most important fact about your childhood is that your parents love you, isn't it. I think there's nothing parents can give a child more than love, and attention, and so on. I suppose the most important fact is that I grew up without having any sort of hang-ups or feeling bitter, and not wanting to do any strenuous reforming. Hah.

**MB:** You grew up....your parent worked in a big house, as it were.

**LD:** Yes, that's right. My father was a chauffeur in London, in Marylebone....

*Images shown of Len Deighton's father and mother*

**LD:** ....and my mother was a cook. An Upstairs Downstairs kind of scene, you know.

**MB:** Did you have a lot of hobbies which you pursued passionately? What were they?

**LD:** Oh yes, making model aeroplanes. I distinctly remember I was incredibly dedicated to aeroplanes in all shapes and forms....

*Images shown of Deighton as a small boy, and as a child with his father.*

**LD:** ....it was my all-consuming passion as child to fly an aeroplane. My father was always saying how much this puzzled him, because I'd not been exposed to aeroplanes in any particular way, and it's difficult now to explain to people who've become used to, for whom the car has become such an ordinary adjunct to life, how devoted my father was to motor cars.

**MB:** Was he an expert mechanic as well?

**LD:** Yes, yes. He was, in fact, I can't remember any motor car ever being taken for repairs, you see it was a point of honour that he made everything, he made the gaskets himself, he, er, he had a sort of workbench and he would work in metal, and if a piece broke he would want to make that piece and so on. The job of a chauffeur in those days was, of course, to be a fitter, an engineer, to be a sort of general sort of genius with motor cars.

**MB:** And did you help your father in his workshop, then?

15:57

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**LD:** I did. I mean, to some extent I know how motor cars work. My father was a rather short tempered man, and I think it was when I was being a refugee from my father's temper that I became interested in my mother cooking, which is how I got into the idea of cooking.

*Images shown of Deighton as a small boy, and with him mother.*

**LD:** My mother was - and is - a very easy-going person, and tells me stories of how she let me make pastry, in spite of the fact that my hands were dirty and so on, and that she finally had to throw it all away. She would indulge me in ideas of cooking quite complicated things, whereas my father had no patience with people who made mistakes. Everything had to be done perfectly.

**MB:** In some autobiographical piece I read you were very modest and disarming and said you're more of less good at nothing.

**LD:** Yeah, that's fair; I'm not being modest and disarming, it really is, I couldn't sustain any other claim, I really was good at nothing. Perhaps if I think schooling is different now and they try to find things children have aptitude for. In the days when schooling merely consisted of sport and sums I certainly wasn't good at either of those things.

*Image of Len Deighton as a school child*

**LD:** I went to a local school. In those days they had a thing called...I don't know what you'd call it now, but it was sort of the eleven-plus examination, which if you passed you'd go onto another school. I passed that exam, almost exactly at the outbreak of war, which was when all the schools closed down, in London anyway, so there were no schools and I was....sort of left to fend for myself, more or less.

17:42

**MB:** When you were at school, with the war going on and your interest in aeroplanes, and you wanted to be a pilot, could you not wait to get into the RAF?

**LD:** Oh I was very keen - mad keen! It demonstrates how much one gets drawn up into a particularly sort of....sort of hysteria of war. But as I remember it....I wouldn't want to mis-remember it deliberately, but as I remember it I was much more interested in the idea of flying than the idea of getting into fighting; I can't remember having any particular desire to sort of bomb anyone or shoot things down.

But gradually, I became more interested in the problems of drawing, so that by the time I went into the Air Force I was less interested in being in the Air Force! I...my ambitions had subtly changed, so when I went into the Air Force I made every effort to be a photographer, which is what happened. So I spent two and a half years as an Air Force photographer.

*Images of Len Deighton and crew mates in front of a plane with photographic kit, and holding his camera, in uniform.*

**LD:** I did a certain amount of flying too, luckily. But at that time my sights were set on a different sort of life that I wanted.

**MB:** And you then went to art college. Was this to be a painter or an artist? Did you reckon on taking your place as a commercial artist?

*Image shown of Len Deighton's mother and father.*

**LD:** I think I probably....I think if you have working class parents who have only enough money too....you know, you're only looking forward to an expectation of being left money, then I think you look forward to a life where you have a regular income of some sort. I think that taking on the life of a painter is a middle class....an upper middle class ambition that I....certainly one that I didn't entertain.

*Images shows of Len Deighton illustrations*

**LD:** I did three years at art school. And I was emboldened then to try for a scholarship at the Royal College of Art, because I felt I had nothing to lose, so I....I mean, I've been enormously lucky with this sort of examination....I mean, I always feel immensely grateful to people who were generous in extending this sort of opportunity, because I think I was a very obnoxious....I don't think I would have seen the potential these people saw. Do you see what I mean? I think I was a brash, very aggressive, unattractive sort of personality.

After I'd done my time at the Royal College, and, er, become the world's oldest child protégé, I felt I ought to get a real job for a change, see what the lie....world was all about, so I applied for a job as a steward on B.O.A.C., but of course someone said, 'you will never get a job as an airline steward', and I said 'why not?' because I'd worked as a waiter; you see, during the time I was a student I'd worked as a waiter and a cook. Anyway, I....he said, anyway you'll never get a job doing that because you'll have to speak a foreign language. They said don't even bother to apply.

So I went along to B.O.A.C. and they said 'do you speak a foreign language?', and on that split second I said, 'yes, German' you see, which was a terrible sort of lie, really....I didn't speak German, so....the only German I knew was from old British war films, like 'Schweinhund' and things like that. And they asked me a lot of questions about food, which I could answer fairly intelligently, and that went alright. And then I thought any minute now there's going to come the question about German, and they said....and they looked at the form and said, 'I understand you can speak German', and I said, 'Well, not terribly well', and I thought that would be a good thing to say, so I said not terribly well, and I thought, here it comes, this is going to be my downfall. But they they all whispered together, and someone said, 'Well, we're going to have to take your word for that because there's no-one on the examination board who speaks German'. Which was terrific....made me feel terribly guilty, it was a great piece of luck. So that's how I worked for B.O.A.C. for a year.

*Image of Len Deighton as a steward in a B.O.A.C. uniform outside a plane.*

**LD:** And that was my sort of sabbatical year, I suppose. And after that I started work, I then, I went to live in New York and began to work as an illustrator in....using the years and years of training that I'd had.

*Image of Len Deighton's illustrations of New York, and of his Penguin front cover of The Disenchanted by Budd Schulberg.*

**MB:** So that was what you wanted to do, be an illustrator?

**LD:** Yes, I think that is what I wanted to do. It is incredibly different. In a way the whole process of drawing and painting much more difficult....I use that word difficult, not more complex, than writing. It is incredibly difficult. I admire immensely the people who are skilled in drawing, and I admire very much the intensity of their vision, and they way that they look at things. I'm very much a visual person and I think to perhaps a lesser extent then, but in the earlier books they're very much the books of an art student, they're about seeing things, and descriptions; and they're not particularly literary descriptions.

*Images of the coast of Portugal around Albufeira*

**MB:** What was it attracted you about this particular place, Albufeira, that attracted you?

**LD:** You say, it attracted me in two ways, first in that it's difficult to get here, and it also attracted me as a place to set a book, erm, because in those days I was very conscious of the idea of using my travel experiences.

**MB:** What did....you set your next book here, *Horse Under Water*.

**LD:** Yes, I did. It's a very unusual town. I that that, er, the way in which the houses are set into the cliff top is extraordinary; the way in which since one walks into the front doors of these houses and finds oneself on the top floor of the houses, with all the other levels being lower down the cliff. And the way in which only one house had access to the lower cliff. The whole of Albufeira seemed to contain a lot of the ingredients that were ready made for a spy thriller.

And there is sort of quite a lot of the Arabic influence here: the little hands of Fatima on the door knockers, for instance.

**MB:** How did you yourself feel, having come to this place about fifteen years ago....ten, twelve, fifteen years ago....erm....and now England's sort of caught up with you in a way, because you've been going round the streets here and even in the off-season it's quite a lot of English voices and quite a lot of English tourists and tourist shops opening up and various hotels, and English is spoken in lots of bars and so on and so forth. Have you run back and found yourself back where you started?

*Images of Len Deighton with his wife and two sons*

**LD:** I've very little social life anywhere; my home life is so happy. I'm very content with it, with the children and so on, it suits me, so I don't know very much about the way in which, the social life of English people and foreigners here is a bit of a closed book to me, I think, it sort of goes on, but I think I don't know very much about it.

25:28

**MB:** After *Ipcress File*, *Horse Under Water*, *Expensive Place to Die*, *Funeral in Berlin* and another couple of books, so, what to do in cookery and what to do in London, which in a sense have come out of your childhood, the next book you wrote - *Bomber* - which is the longest book you've written, and was intensely well-researched, about one day - a fictional day, June 31st, when there's a heavy bombing attack, six hundred Lancasters, Stirlings and Wellingtons go to attack somewhere on the Ruhr; there's a mistake and they bomb a small, little harmless town instead, and raze it to the ground. It's told from the point of view

of the Luftwaffe, and of the RAF and of the people in the town. Er....now why did you want to do that? It's a massive book; I think it's a terrific book, it's magnificently well-researched. Tell us why you wanted to do that and how you set about it.

**LD:** If I'm to be honest with you, I don't know. I had spent the previous couple of years working in the film industry and, once again, just as earlier in my life, I'd started writing books because I was fed up with working with very large groups of people, having ideas modified and sometimes improved, of course, in any case changed, by corporate decisions.

So when I wanted to write *Bomber* it was essentially a book that emerged from my desire to sit in a room on my own, in a way of speaking, and work on a book. I've always been....I'm interested in the history of the Second World War in particular for many years. I started out writing notes of the history of warfare before, when, I think before I was twenty, and I was interested in the history of warfare and began sketching out an idea of writing it all down, in that way when you are a teenager, and you want to write down everything you know.

I had that sort of feeling, and I felt like a war book, and there were certain things about the bombing raid which fascinated me very much, so I was fascinated by the way in which....if you take....if you take the world....that a bombing raid on Berlin consisted of a lot of men going up 20,000 feet or so in the air, then traveling a very very long distance across the globe, then traveling an awfully long distance back home. It had a curious shape to it, do you see what I mean? It's the fascinating things of coming so close to these cities but never visiting them. I mean, these airmen had never been abroad even and yet they were, they'd been just a few thousand feet over the top of these places, that fascinated me.

And the fact that there was a connection, there was an electronic connection, the idea that there was on the German side that these aircraft were being contacted by means of radar beams and that there were people who were going to be bombed, that there were in fact....when I encountered this sort of information, I had the same sort of excitement I sometimes find in people who are keen on science fiction, and I think it was this unreal quality of electronic warfare which made me want to mix it with humans. And a man had, had said to me....erm....some little time before I started doing the book, that he said 'you should write a book about machines because you like machines'. He said 'very few people like machines, and you like machines, you should consider writing a book in which you display this interest.

**MB:** And affection?

**LD:** Yeah. Because, you see, I think machines can't make mistakes, there's a malign suggestion - distributed by banks - that computers make mistakes. I want to tell you that computers cannot make mistakes, and anyone who suggests that a computer can make mistakes is imbuing a computer with characteristics of which are only in human beings.

**MB:** One of the things about *Bomber* is the way in which....it can almost be said that it is the quality of the man is judged by the quality of their relationship with the machine. The best pilots; the man who operates the radar so very well, Augustus Bach; Löwenherz on the German side and Lambert on the British side, they treat their machines very well and in a sense their moral qualities follow from that. Your book went through twenty-five drafts; you put it through a computer to check up on your facts, you....

**LD:** I even had more, it's true, I had more, it's amazing I probably had five, six, seven times....I happened to look through my notes, and I estimated that my hand-written notes for *Bomber* were, must have been over half a million words. Not that's without all the printed material, that's without all the letters, it's without tape recordings, without all of the files of stuff, and clippings and cuttings.

**MB:** The book, it seems to me, started from an anti-war feeling, this book started many years ago, when you came out of a briefing, and men cheered when they were told that Sterling's were going to go on a bombing mission, because they knew that Sterlings were slower, and flew lower, and were more likely to get knocked off than those flying higher, so they were that much safer than their friends, presumably, in the Sterlings. Apparently the soft underbelly, going through the night sky, and that....and the book is sort of full of an anti-war feeling, that's not propagandist, because it's said in so many different ways. Would that be true?

31:44

**LD:** Well....someone wrote in a letter to me, he said 'I've read *Bomber*, and I don't know why you claim it's an anti-war book, because I think it's a pro-war book', do you see? And I wrote back and said, 'I never said it was an anti-war book, all I can say is it's a war book, and if you'd like to experience the things that happen in this book, you'll like to be in a war, and I sincerely advise you to get into one at the earliest opportunity.' All I was doing was mirroring the research I'd done about the war and approached it with the same clinical attitude with which I'd have approached the Thirty Years War or any other historical battle, and had I been able to contact survivors and eye witnesses I would have looked at it. I chose to write it as a fiction book because I was more at home with that. I set it on a fictional day so that this enable me to make a mixture of facts so that, in a way, it didn't actually happen, but I certainly didn't exaggerate. There is no happening in that book which is exaggerated; in fact, that raid which I have described in detail is a minor raid.

**MB:** Although there's a lot of violent action in your book - and again, you've written....a gull flies through the windscreen of Kulke, the SS man, and splits his face open; another man in a parachute makes an indentation on the ground and splits open like a slaughtered animal, and that brings you up short. But isn't it any violence, in that....what fills many books these days....of action books, of people stabbing, killing, blood spurting....there's no revelling in violence, just as there's no revelling in sex. It was a deliberate policy on your part.

**LD:** Well it is, but, I don't actually like to look at a boxing match. I mean, a boxing match offends me, I find great difficulty in watching it. I'm not attracted to violence. I actually find that if I see a film in which there is a lot of violence, I want to leave, if I can I will; if I'm watching it on television I'll switch it off. I can do so, without giving a lot of people a bad time. I don't like violence; I don't like this idea....can I just say, that there is a school of writing that exists - particularly in Hollywood - that has a moral belief, that if you show the bullies being violent, you can end your story by having the people who were bullied show more violence towards the bullies than they ever believed was possible and we're all supposed to applaud, and that's all right. I think that's absolutely not alright with me, I don't believe that I want to write any books in which violence triumphs. I think there is, I believe there is a responsibility as a writer to not demonstrate....to try to show that intellect triumphs over violence, which I think is a basic code which I subscribe to.

I felt that this was the only book I've ever written in which the expressing and describing of violence was a legitimate way of telling the story, but I tried to make sure I didn't use that violence in any titillatory way, and I tried to make sure I didn't appeal to any perverse...or perverse ideas about violence. I think it's a great responsibility. I think a writer must take this very, very seriously as part of his job.

*Image of the front cover of Declaration of War*

**MB:** After *Bomber*, you published a collection of short stories, *Declarations of War*, and these wars are in different periods of time: they're in imperial India, they're in Vietnam, they're in Second World War, of course, and one of them's even in the Civil War, the American Civil War - *Indiscipline*. How did you come to write that?

**LD:** Well....I've been interested....perhaps one day I'll write a book about the idea of physically insignificant people being great warriors within the structure of modern machines, and so on; that the age when you needed people of great muscular strength to be successful in military terms have long since passed, and in this story I wanted to have a diminutive person who was not respected or regarded by the men under his command

*Note saying 'Section removed due to copyright restrictions' - this is the second dramatisation made for this programme, of the story Discipline, starring Tony Haygarth as Winkelstein.*

**MB:** This would be Winkelstein.

**LD:** Winkelstein is a small, Jewish immigrant who had come to America and, to some extent, had been disappointed by what he'd found there but he was challenged by his inclusion in an American conflict he really has not great interest in. But he tries to do his due and do his best, once he gets swept up in all this idea. And he doesn't really realise the power of life and death he holds over....he's a sergeant....he gradually discovers, with the aid of the officer who despises him almost as much as his men do, with no element of sadism, he has found himself sending them to more than certain death. And I've hinted at what would be the reaction of the men in this unit, and the way in which they in future cease to despise him, and certainly cease to irritate him, and interestingly because they realise that their life....the continuance of their lives depends upon making him happy in one way or another.

**MB:** Since *Bomber* you've written two spy novels. Your latest book, *Fighter*, is a non-fiction successor to *Bomber*. Why did you decide to write a non-fiction book?

**LD:** I felt it would be a good idea to embark upon a long project and I decided that, for my own amusement, that I would write what was at first going to be a twelve chapter book, not for publication necessarily, but a book describing the Second World War in terms of the technical accomplishment.

When I started to do this, and I did it as a hobby, for fun, I realised that I wouldn't be able to do it as a twelve chapter book, I would have to do it as a twelve volume series of books. So this simply, really provided me with a chance to make a reading list, and for me to study what I considered to be twelve important battles of the war, choosing them so that each one would have an area of technology, so for example submarines, or aircraft carriers, or tanks, or radar and so on.

*Image of sketched drawings from Fighter*

Oh I should say that this is with all my little drawings and something, a personal thing, very much like a notebook, I decided to do exactly that. And instead of taking the first battle that I'd worked on....there was an element of self-indulgence, in that I should say I planned to go to each of these worldwide battlefields and talk to survivors and so on, so there's a....I'm interested in it in a sort of selfish way. But of course, once I decided it could be published I could be more more self indulgent....I had a rationale for actually spending money and spending more time on it.

Finally I took the Battle of Britain, as an area in which I'd done a lot of research, to be the first one published. It is completely historical, it is a history book, a straightforward history book. But it takes technology....for instance, it says, if the Battle of Britain was fought by metal monoplanes, why did the Wright brothers build a bi-plane, I mean as a begin....erm, the, it takes radar, so I thought who thought of radar? And surprisingly enough, it is that Germans have radar, and they had developed very good radar before the British had even thought of having radar. And so I took the technical development of these two basic weapons: the monoplane fighter....and only two nations had highly developed monoplane fighters ready for action and in production by 1940.

And because I'd met so many pilots doing the research for *Bomber*, I had a whole, ready made number of people I could correspond with. I'd found many of those people I'd talked with had become high-ranking officers by the time of the latter half of the war, were fighter pilots or lower ranking officers during the Battle of Britain. And very often the conversation moved off, when we were talking about the Battle of Britain, and I felt that what I'd read about the Battle of Britain had left me with enough of a distorted impression to be surprised by what I had uncovered, and I felt what I uncovered was worth putting in book form.

The book is, really, five different books, which I've sort of threaded together, but to tell the story of the Battle of Britain in tactical terms, to, not as one darned thing after the other, as Arnold Toynbee said so much of history was, but to show cause and effect, and to show how each side responded to what the other side did, in what one may describe as a game of chess.

**MB:** Finally, you are very successful.....erm....and successful at a lot of things, fiction and non-fiction, and writing dossiers and writing cookery books and all that sort of thing, and yet of many of the writers I've spoken to over the last few years, you live the most dedicated life of all, er, and you are probably the most hard-working writer I've talked to. Why do you think that is?

**LD:** Well, I mean I'm delighted to hear you say that. I mean, my puritan instincts absolutely glow at that description, you couldn't please me more. Well, I, there is....if you grow up seeing your parents working very hard....erm, my father died before he had any retirement, he worked from they day he was born until the day he died, I suppose, my mother similarly worked hard all her life, I think that has an effect upon a child, and makes it very very difficult to....in fact, it makes it very difficult for me to do a lot of things that are completely legitimate; as I said to you earlier, I don't read very much fiction, then undoubtedly one of the reasons for this is that if I'm reading fiction, and Ysabel [his wife] is doing the laundry, I feel incredibly guilty about this, it seems that if I'm thumping a typewriter, I don't have to feel so guilty. So I think that is one element.

And I think in the same way I've sometimes met me who are, 'I'll work in the plastics factory making a fortune until I'm forty a, and then I'll pain works of art', by the time they're forty they've go so used to running a plastics factory that they can't do anything else. And it's the same with me, you see, I've got so used to working that, no matter how much I would like to not work, however much I admire people who don't work - because that in itself is now....I'm stuck with it!

End

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