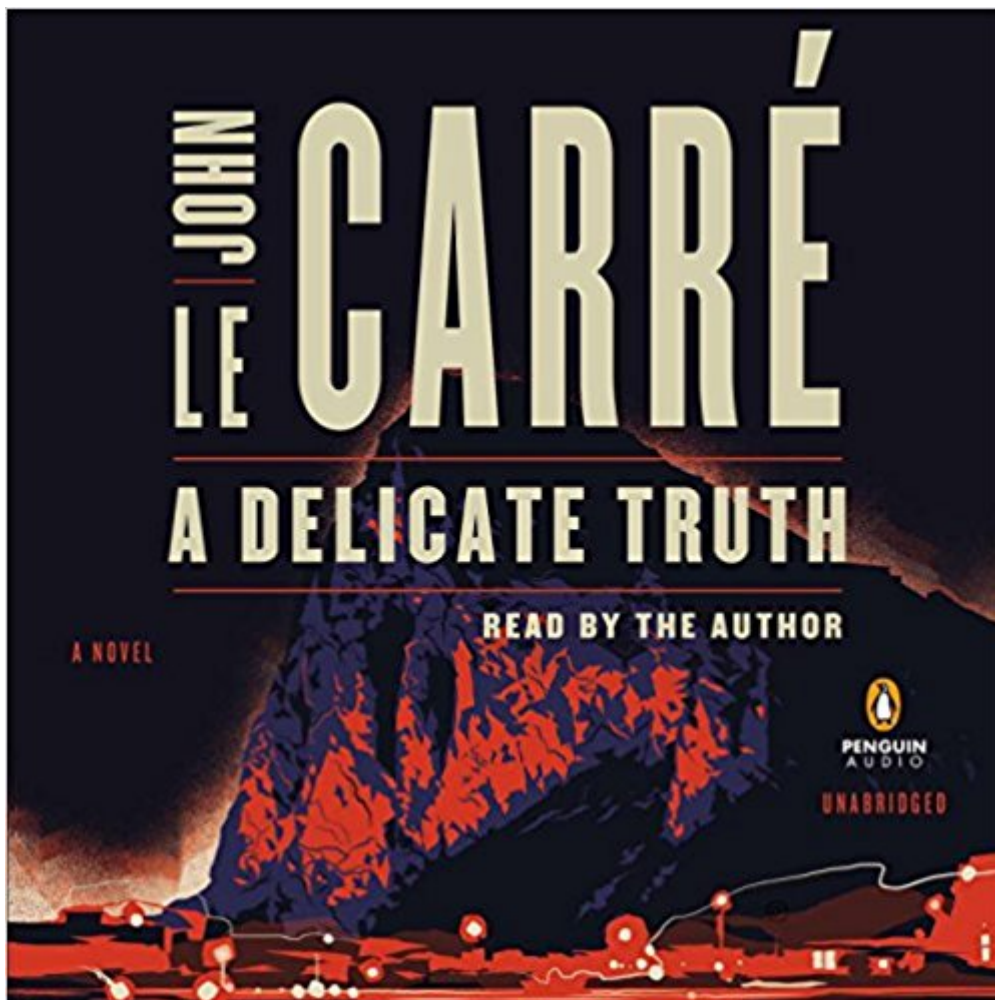


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# A Delicate Truth: A Novel



## Synopsis

A counter-terrorist operation, codenamed *Wildfire*, is being mounted on the British crown colony of Gibraltar. Its purpose: to capture and abduct a high-value jihadist arms buyer. Its authors: an ambitious Foreign Office Minister, a private defense contractor who is also his bosom friend, and a shady American CIA operative of the evangelical far-right. So delicate is the operation that even the Minister's personal private secretary, Toby Bell, is not cleared for it. Three years later, a disgraced Special Forces Soldier delivers a message from the dead. Was *Operation Wildfire* the success it was cracked up to be or a human tragedy that was ruthlessly covered up? Summoned by Sir Christopher (Kit's father) Probyn, retired British diplomat, to his decaying Cornish manor house, and closely observed by Kit's daughter, Emily, Toby must choose between his conscience and duty to his Service. If the only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is that good men do nothing, how can he keep silent?

## Book Information

Audio CD

Publisher: Penguin Audio; Unabridged edition (May 7, 2013)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 1611761751

ISBN-13: 978-1611761757

Product Dimensions: 5.4 x 1.4 x 5.7 inches

Shipping Weight: 8 ounces

Average Customer Review: 3.9 out of 5 stars 735 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #1,512,032 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #5 in Books > Books on CD >

Authors, A-Z > ( L ) > Le Carre, John #2333 in Books > Books on CD > Mystery & Thrillers

#2715 in Books > Mystery, Thriller & Suspense > Thrillers & Suspense > Spies & Politics >

Terrorism

## Customer Reviews

**\*Starred Review\*** Shockingly, Le Carré no longer writes about moral ambiguity. Gone is any semblance of the notion that a government and its emissaries in the secret services could ever be on the side of the individual. That's been true for several novels—certainly since *The Constant Gardener* (2001)—but Le Carré's latest is perhaps the most definitive statement yet of his new worldview. It starts with a 2008 counterterrorism operation, code-named *Wildfire*, gone wrong. A team of agents, led by a British foreign minister and a private

defense contractor, was charged with capturing a terrorist on the island of Gibraltar. Billed as a rousing success, the op was, in fact, a fiasco. Three years later, a now-disgraced British agent tells the real story to retired diplomat Sir Christopher Probyn, also involved in the mission but in the dark as to what actually happened. Probyn eventually teams with Toby Bell, secretary to the minister in charge of Wildfire. Bell, also in the dark, starts digging and finds he faces a personal crisis: expose the cover-up and scuttle his career or keep quiet. Whistle-blowers risking life and livelihood to bring evil bureaucrats to their knees have long been a staple of espionage fiction. In *le Carr's* new world, however, evil bureaucrats never skin their knees; there are no happy endings, even attenuated ones. We commented in our 2008 review of *le Carr's* *A Most Wanted Man* (a film version of which will open in the fall) on the slow, inexorable way that, in the novel, "institutional will grinds down individual lives." That grinding process is even more brutal this time around, as *le Carr* further establishes himself as a master of a new, shockingly realistic kind of noir in which right-thinking individuals who challenge the institutional order of things always lose. No ambiguity there but plenty of gut-wrenching tragedy. HIGH-DEMAND BACKSTORY: It's been nearly 50 years since *le Carr* broke through with *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold*. He has set the bar ever since for espionage fiction that appeals to head and heart rather than just quickening the reader's pulse. --Bill Ott --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

Praise for *A DELICATE TRUTH* "At the moment a new generation is stumbling upon his work, *le Carr* is still writing at something close to the top of his game. [A Delicate Truth] is an elegant yet embittered indictment of extraordinary rendition, American right-wing evangelical excess and the corporatization of warfare. It has a gently flickering love story and jangling ending. And *le Carr* has not lost his ability to sketch, in a line or two, an entire character." •Dwight Garner, *The New York Times Magazine* (front page) "The narrative dominoes fall with masterly precision....As ever, *le Carr's* prose is fluid, carrying the reader toward an inevitable yet nail-biting climax." •Olen Steinhauer, *The New York Times Book Review* "Timelier than ever." •The New York Times "Well-wrought." A sharply sketched gallery of characters. •The Wall Street Journal "Le Carr is fiercely modern | a confluence of styles, voices, approaches | A novel that beckons us beyond any and all expectations." •Washington Post "[L]e Carr is...at full power with a book that draws on a career's worth of literary skill and international analysis. No

other writer has chartered – pitilessly for politicians but thrillingly for readers – the public and secret histories of his times. – The Guardian (UK) – “Gorgeous writing. It’s sophisticated storytelling at its very best. – USA Today – “A ripping, fun yarn. – Entertainment Weekly – “Loyalty to the crown is tested; consciences are checked; and nothing is more terrifying than, as this novel’s protagonist puts it, – a solitary decider – asking himself how on earth he talked himself into this mess. – The Daily Beast – “A remarkably assured touch. [Le Carré] has maintained full control of his prodigious literary talents. – SF Gate – “The dirty deeds are brutal and crude. And so is the cover-up. – The Huffington Post – “Heady and absorbing.... John le Carré remains in full command of both the craft of writing and the art of espionage. – Christian Science Monitor – “Le Carré further establishes himself as a master of a new, shockingly realistic kind of noir. – Booklist (Starred) – “This is a guaranteed hair-raising cerebral fright, especially for anyone who enjoyed Robert Harris’s The Ghost or who just knows his or her email account has been hacked. – Library Journal (Starred) – “Le Carré focuses on the moral rot and creeping terror barely concealed by the affable old-boy blather that marks the pillars of the intelligence community. – Kirkus Reviews (Starred) – “A great story in sterling prose. – Publishers Weekly – “Le Carré proves himself a master of character development. – The Millions – “Another breathtakingly good work. [the] story hurtles along with the speed of light. – Newsday – “The upper register of a great writer’s oeuvre. Knowledge is not power in the novel: John le Carré believes that truth, difficult and generous on its own, can also kill you. – St. Louis Post-Dispatch – “Characteristically clever. – The Kansas City Star – “Stylish, taut storytelling. One of our finest writers. – Tampa Bay Times – “Witty as it is insightful. A Delicate Truth is a delightful read that unnerves as it entertains. – The Columbus Dispatch – “The master storyteller, le Carré, is still at war. His foes now are legion. But his battles, and his novels, are flooded with light and hope. He pins his faith, and that of his readers, on the fundamental decency of those most vulnerable and quirky of warriors – the average joes. – OregonLive.com – “Vintage le Carré. – Pittsburgh Post-Gazette – “A career’s worth of literary skill and international analysis. – the public and

secret history of his times. •The Guardian (UK) “Remarkable [A Delicate Truth] displays the mastery of the early and the passion of late Le Carré. •Robert McCrum, The Observer (UK) “Writing of such quality that it will be read in one hundred years [Le Carré] found his canvas in espionage, as Dickens did in other worlds. The two men deserve comparison. •Daily Mail (UK) “The tension ratchets up superbly as revelation follows on revelation [Le Carré] is a writer of towering gifts, whose fiction appeals to a reading public both popular and serious. A talent to provoke as well as unsettle. •The Independent (UK) “

At one time I thought "what will LeCarre write about after the Cold War ended?" Well, he's found a lot of themes that resonate with the political milieu of the 21st century and he's still compelling. A Delicate Truth is about a "semi off the books" undertaking to capture a terrorist (a so-called extraordinary rendition) who's been traced to Gibraltar. A British foreign office official is conscripted to observe the commando type action and report to his minister. It's a hush-hush quasi-legal plan that has implicit support of the British and American governments. Orchestrating the operation is a shadowy American defense corporation with ties to a right wing group with wealthy evangelist supporters. The plan utilizes military-style contractors to snatch the suspect from Gibraltar. No surprise that the plan is bungled and the affair is covered up from public exposure. Several years later, the foreign official and one of the commandos (who was on loan from his British army regiment) discover how wrong the affair went. They embark on an effort to bring the truth to light and in so doing encounter the wrath of the plan's sponsors who are determined to use any means to keep it secret. LeCarre tells us through this story of the worrisome intertwining of governments and private contractors to carry out governmental functions. While one does not always trust governments to act legitimately and honestly, there is, at least in western democracies, the expectation that the public has standing to know and judge the government's actions and that boundaries set through the political processes really matter. The use of corporate entities (who have their own interests at their core) allows actions that transcend the moral constraints of government bodies. That corporations can and will transgress legal and ethical strictures is vividly portrayed through this novel. The dilemma of the book's protagonists is an interesting parallel to Edward Snowden and the NSA revelations. Snowden (who was a private contractor) swore to keep his work secret. His conscience compelled him to break his oath and reveal aspects of intelligence gathering that have shocked the public and would bring about the sanction of the US government, if it could.

Was he justified in his action? (To go far back in time, was so-called "Deep Throat" justified in bringing to light the illegal activities of Nixonites?) These are weighty matters that deserve deep thought.

This isn't a spy novel. Rather, it tells the story of a (fairly low-octane) anti terror operation gone wrong, the attempts of a faction of government to conceal that, and how a whistleblower in the British diplomatic corps tries to uncover what happened. If that sounds a lot more boring than what the Le Carre books most people probably love are about (clever spies with complex personalities trying to outsmart each other against the backdrop of global conflicts), then you get a taste of why this isn't my favorite Le Carre book by a long shot. The story lacks any kind of major plot twist, its few turning points are predictable, and most characters in the book surprisingly (for Le Carre) simplistic. There is the eminence grise in the British foreign office who turns a blind eye when it matters but comes around just in time, the previously plain and opportunistic careerist who finally grows some balls but then screws it up just because of his newfound courage, the greedy American hip shooter. None of these characters has any kind of deeper level that is revealed as the story unfolds. And neither, for that matter, has the story. Which, on top of that, ends prematurely and without further reveal. Le Carre is always worth a read for his elegant language and the existential angst a lot of his characters convey. But beyond that, this book isn't terribly satisfying.

Of John Le Carre's twenty-three novels, thirteen are Cold War stories, stories stemming from the titanic ideological struggle that kept intelligence agencies well-stocked in cloaks and daggers for half a century. But, with the Cold War over and the bones picked clean, spy novels, like nations, need new enemies. The insidious villain in Le Carré's latest novel, *A DELICATE TRUTH*, is much harder to classify than the sly KGB agents of yore. The story kicks-off with a covert rendition in Gibraltar. It's unclear under whose aegis the operation falls, even to those on the ground. There's a UK MP coordinating with a South African mercenary, while a British intelligence officer manages a British Special Forces Unit on land as private American military contractors wait in the harbor. Confusion establishes itself from the get-go, and erupts when the operation predictably goes awry. In the aftermath, Toby Bell, the MP's secretary, seeks answers. His curiosity spurs a swift, escalating mystery. The pages burn with tension all the way to the last sentence as Toby strives for truth in a system that seems designed to counter truth itself. Character development has never been Le Carré's strength - though perhaps British civil servants don't make the most colorful subjects - but the author's depiction of American interests is downright unsophisticated. A moneyed American

defense contractor plays an ample if shadowy role in the events that unfold; they're described as "a caucus of wealthy American conservative evangelicals convinced that the Central Intelligence Agency is overrun with red-toothed Islamic sympathisers and liberal f\*\*\*ots". Such characterizations speak to the novel's polemical undertone, an unfortunate distraction from what's otherwise a very serviceable espionage thriller. Crankiness runs amok. As he sits in the Cornish lowlands, one can imagine Le Carré reading The Guardian and muttering about how things were "back in my day." Tony Blair and New Labour are pilloried at every opportunity, the author's personal disappointment leaking into the narrative. The privatization of intelligence and defense clearly irks an old Cold War spy like Le Carré. But perhaps it's victory's ironic legacy: the good guys won, democracy and capitalism prevailed. Now we live in a world where everything and everybody are for sale. The new enemy will be harder to eradicate this time because it resides within human nature itself.

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