

Restless by William Boyd

'Death may occur this very afternoon.' - Marcel Proust

Historical Background – Real Spies

Restless is based on the little known fact that there were a huge number of British spies in America in 1940. American society and the political climate were markedly different from today. Eighty percent of Americans were opposed to war; the government was anti-interventionist; and there was no 'special relationship' with Britain, as there is now. The British government under Churchill was desperate for the US to join them in the war effort, so they set up a massive 'British Security Coordination' (BSC) office in New York.

The BSC's role was to 'persuade' the American people to help Britain. Employing up to 3000 personnel, the BSC planted propaganda with journalists and newspapers, manipulated radio with fake news, and generally played up the Nazi threat. The episode in the novel with Nazi maps of the Americas, is authentic. Of course it wasn't the BSC that turned the tide of American involvement – it was the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour and Hitler's declaration of war on the US. James Bond is possibly the most well-known spy in fiction. But author Ian Fleming admits that 'Bond is a highly romanticized version of a true spy. The real thing is...William Stephenson.' Stephenson was a Canadian war hero and spymaster who ran the BSC office in New York – and no doubt an inspiration for the characters in Restless.

The BSC's covert actions are not part of the official canon of heroic World War Two stories. They are more a part of that morally ambiguous area of war experience, which not every nation wants to re-examine. For Britain this probably includes the devastating carpet-bombing of German cities. For Germany it was the Holocaust. For the US it may be the use of the A-bomb in Japan.

The novel also touches on another spy organisation. SAVAK was Iran's version of the CIA from 1957 to 1979 when the Revolution occurred. It's estimated that about a third of all Iranian men were informants or agents for SAVAK.

The Novel

Restless is a tightly-plotted spy story but it resists the predictable elements of the genre. How? Because it is not entirely plot driven and it avoids the fantasy spy antics of populist spies such as James Bond. Boyd wanted to write a novel that was 'well carpentered with many finely-tuned complexities', that also examined the psychology of spying. I think he succeeds in this by using a dominant theme, an arresting story structure, depth of character, and a thoughtful language style.

Theme – Restlessness

The book has an 'epigraph' at the start – a quotation that suggests the theme of a story. It's a passage that I more fully appreciated after reading the novel. Marcel Proust's quote almost personifies death, 'advancing' upon an unsuspecting human life. He asks the question, what if you knew your 'death may occur this very afternoon'? This novel is the story of a restless character (Eva) who has been living in the daily shadow of death – at times quite literally. Indeed, in the first sentence we hear her say "one day someone will come and kill me" (a shocking statement from a parent).

William Boyd's stated aim in writing the novel was to make the life of the spy seem relevant to his readers, rather than just a distant literary invention. He believes that the human condition is one of restlessness: 'We too are waiting for something inevitable, something to catch up with us: our deaths.' The character of the spy is perhaps an extreme, but effective metaphor for this sense of unease. A spy is always on the move, on edge, watching for the unknown – 'eternally restless' as Boyd says.

The spy is restless because nobody can be trusted. Romer tells Eva that his number one rule is 'Don't trust anyone.' Mistrust is in fact the basic job requirement for spying: everyone becomes a threat; and you must also disguise your own identity. Boyd describes this as 'a dehumanising process' because a healthy emotional life cannot be sustained in such a state of tension.

In the end it seems that only Ruth has learned to live with some acceptance of our common mortality: 'One day someone is going to come and take us away: you don't need to have been a spy.'

Structure

The novel's structure alternates between time periods, chapter about, to gradually unfold the story of a mother and daughter. Ruth can hardly believe her mother's revelation about her true identity – it has been so cleverly concealed. Sally/Eva has been a spy in the Second World War, but the game became deadly when she becomes lovers with a spy and someone betrays her. She enlists Ruth to find out the truth about what happened all those years ago. The tension grows in both their stories, finally merging mother and daughter's lives in the tense climax.

This flashback structure is no mere writer's device – like finding a old diary in the attic is so often just an excuse to tell an historical story. Eva's story-telling chapters are integral to her character. She drip-feeds her story to her daughter (and to us) for a good reason. Like Ruth, we the reader might get impatient sometimes and cry out 'why don't you just give us the whole bloody thing?' But as Ruth says, 'She wanted me to be drawn in, to make the revelations endure....to keep me on my toes.' This is so typical of Eva, the woman in control of every detail – a spy to the end. But it's also the essence of novel writing – to give the reader a sustained emotional journey. And it's why we love to read spy stories, because they keep us on edge. Perhaps Boyd is right in saying we are all 'restless' – at least in that we enjoy the vicarious edginess of a good thriller.

Character

The second sophistication in this spy story is characterization. The reason these dual story strands work so well is that both characters have a strong voice and a compelling story to tell. Ruth is a stropmy young mum in the 1970s, with strength of personality and barely suppressed anger at times. As well as adapting to a 'new' mother, Ruth is being challenged by the men in her own life. Things get

increasingly edgy for Ruth, and she experiences echoes of her mother's paranoia.

Eva is a glamorous and, as it emerges, an extremely efficient spy. Strongly motivated by the 'right' reasons (her brother's death), she finds her spy duties lead her into murky moral waters, and increasing violence. Boyd said he enjoyed 'the challenge of changing sex'. Writing from a woman's viewpoint enabled him to exercise his imagination. It certainly gives the sometimes male-centric spy genre a lot of appeal for female readers – as well as those from a wide age-range given the 40 year time period covered in the book.

Style

In many ways *Restless* is the traditional spy chase tale – like John Buchan's *The Thirty-Nine Steps* – but on an international scale. The cat-and-mouse game is enhanced by descriptions of the spy-craft (disguises, safe-houses, surveillance tricks) that become a way of life for Eva. Boyd also inserts shocking revelations, usually as cliffhanger chapter endings, of the 'I think someone is trying to kill me' variety.

There's much in Boyd's 'well-carpentered' writing style that gives the chase even more depth. He's adept at describing places without resorting to clichés, and in a way that reflects the mood of his characters. At the start of the novel, the heart of England is 'an inverse Shangri-La where everything became older, mouldier and more decrepit'. On Eva's train journey to become a spy, she observes the post-winter landscape: 'it may be summer, but the land seemed to be saying, but I won't let my guard down'. Eva will never relax again either and the imagery of nature becomes a foreboding sign of things to come. At the end too, Eva's 'uncut grass bends and flows almost like a living thing' in response to her unabated restlessness.

The Author

William Boyd was born in Ghana in 1952 and educated in England. He's written 9 novels and 13 screenplays which have been filmed for television and movies

(one of which he directed). Boyd has been described as 'a wry historian of 20th century life' and many of his stories are a mix of fact and fiction. While acknowledging that the novel is the best art form for capturing life's complexities, he also says that 'I want to make my fiction seem as real as possible.' His writing is often concerned with the British persona and its quirks. His first, award-winning novel, *A Good Man in Africa* (1981), is a comedy of diplomatic British manners. The second, *An Ice Cream War* (1982), is about the British fighting in Africa in World War One; while *Any Human Heart* (2002) looks at English Literature.

Boyd is also concerned with human identity, especially the way some people can abandon their 'natural persona' and role-play their whole life. He says that 'there's no doubt that in my books this theme continues to reappear.'

Questions

1. The story generates a considerable amount of suspense. How does the writer achieve this? What aspects did you find most suspenseful? Would *Restless* make an effective movie thriller as it stands?
2. This is the kind of novel where everything builds to a final revelation or confrontation. Many whodunits are 'undone' by a lame or unconvincing ending. How do you rate the ending of *Restless*? Was it satisfying for you? Did you see it coming?
3. Re-read the Proust epigraph at the start. Did Boyd succeed in drawing out his theme of restless human nature? Who are his restless characters? Do you agree that the human condition is restless?
If you knew the exact time of your death, would it change the way you live now?
How?
4. 'For the spy, the world and its people were different.' Why? What do you think it would be like to live in world where you could not trust anyone?

5. The novel has a parallel structure: telling mother and daughter's stories. What elements of Ruth's story had echoes of her mother's life? Why did Boyd choose this structure? Did this work for you as a reader? Were both strands equally compelling, or did one grab you more? Why?

6. Which characters did you relate to closely? Was Eva romanticised as the gorgeous spy? Did Boyd capture the woman's point of view?

7. 'How little we know of our parents' biographies...unless we take the trouble to dig deeper' says Ruth. Is this true – can we fully know our parents? Are there things parents tend not to tell their children?

8. The British spy network planted fake reports in the media, fed 'privileged' information to key journalists, and put out pro-British stories. Does this happen today? Who is most likely to try to manipulate the media? Can you believe what the news media reports?

9. Winston Churchill set up the spy network to stop Hitler. Is spying a necessary evil? Does anything go in wartime, for example, the bombing of civilians? Or should normal morality be suspended during wars?

Reading and Viewing

William Boyd's website has some interesting interviews with him about the evolution of *Restless*:

www.williamboyd.co.uk

Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy by John Le Carre

Charlotte Gray by Sebastian Faulks: a female spy in the Resistance.

Among the Dead Cities by A.C. Grayling – did Britain commit war crimes?

Fascination by William Boyd – short stories

Any Human Heart by William Boyd – a novel in diary format

