

The Quiet American

G. Greene

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Greene, the highbrows lowbrow and the lowbrows highbrow, may be hard to exactly pinpoint. Is he a serious writer or a mere entertainer? Or a little bit of both? Both, he seems to claim himself, dividing his output between the serious ones pertaining to questions of Roman Catholicism, to which he is a convert, and the mere entertainers, which have no such ambitions. But even in his serious work, there is some entertainment, and in his entertainers there are references to serious issues. Anyway, you may not like him, but you have to admit that he writes well. Well, well in a wearied way, not with passion, not with earnest sincerity, but cynically like an experienced professional. Passion no, but a little bit of pride, at being able to churn out a well composed tale at regular intervals.

The novel set in Vietnam in the early fifties. The French are being driven out of their colony, and Ho Chi Minh is already a figure mentioned a few times in the narrative. There are also Americans, one particular of the title, who slowly are being eased in as a replacement for the French. This is after the end of the Korean War which was the first, and maybe the most serious, of the conflagrations of the Cold War. This is also Cold War, with Communist guerillas in ascendancy, but along with those there are also other groups jockeying for power. Everyone against everyone else, as in Syria of today, except the war is less intense, as there are less weapons around. Greene displays a remarkable prescience, considering the time of the composition of the novel. The quest of the West is ill-defined and futile, its presence is temporary, and will eventually be phased out, even if it would take another twenty years. It is a low-grade war. The authorities are in control in daytime, but at night the rebels hold their own, taking posts and sniping. There are bombings in the north using napalm, lots of accidental civilian casualties, so called collateral damage, and even a bomb going off in a market square killing and maiming indiscriminately.

The narrator is a certain Mr Fowler. A British reporter. The archetypical Greene character, getting on in years, weary and cynical, with a young native woman keeping him company, making up opium pipes for him, sharing his bed. Into the scene enters the American Pyle. Clean cut, idealistic, and naive. In fact we are only introduced to him as he is found dead, what follows is the standard narrative trick of retroactive telling, jumping back and forth in time. Pyle is here to do good. To make the world safe for democracy and hence affluence. He is taken by the author York's works, especially on the desirability of a Third force, distinct both from the corrupted past of the old colonial powers, and the emerging Communists. The free world at its best, and most innocent. Pyle is innocent, and innocence can be very aggressive and destructive, and Pyle is very much, in spite of himself, a confirmation of the dangers of innocence. Pure, wholesome American innocence. As Fowler remarks, Pyle is out of his element. He belongs to the country clubs of the American Northeast, to the bars of New York, to the campuses of the Ivy League (his father a professor of underwater erosion), not here. Especially as he takes a fancy to Fowler's woman and imagines he is in love with her, falling in the trap of her

sister who is set to set up a match. Pyle is innocent and wants to do the honorable thing, to marry her, something that Fowler cannot do as he is married back in England to a woman who on religious principles refuses to divorce him. Given his youth, his nationality, his wealth and above all his honorable intentions, he believes that he not only has the edge but the right to claim her. Still naive, and innocent as he is, he wants the blessings of Fowler. Fowler is not amused, after all he has no desire to let go of his comfort, and he resents her moving in with Pyle.

The suspense is kept on, with vignettes of wars, ambushes and casualties, escaping an ambush Fowler breaks a leg and his life is saved by Pyle, risking his own. After all he is naive and innocent and believes that heroic acts belong to your duties. Then it is relieved that after all Fowler has a hand at having Pyle killed. Ostensibly to punish him for having been behind the bombing, or at least involved in it, but of course really to be rid of an inconvenient rival. His involvement is peripheral, to the point that he almost fools himself that he is innocent, but his complicity nevertheless undeniable. By not effectively spoiling a plan set up by locals he makes sure that Pyle comes to grief. No one will know of course, least of all his French friend, the police officer Vigot, and he decides to reap the fruits. The woman moves back to him without much ado, there are other good news. He manages to postpone for a year at least his return to the head-office in London to play the role of a senior commentator, and his estranged wife relents and withdraws her objections to a divorce. He is muddling through and the book ends of course.

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