

Eric Ambler

The very first biography of a masterly writer

Graham Greene called him 'our greatest thriller writer' and 'the master', to John le Carré his work is the well into which every thriller writer had dipped.

Now the very first biography of Eric Ambler (1909-1998) has been published in German. It is based on interviews with relatives, friends and colleagues of Ambler, on a thorough evaluation of the Ambler archive at Boston University, including previously unreleased material, as well as on an intense analysis of his work. Running to 600 pages it delivers a comprehensive overview of Ambler's work and life.

The biography argues the literary quality of Ambler's work and establishes him as an unsparing chronicler of the political and emotional turmoil of the 'short 20th century'. It documents his wry, precise story-telling, his instinctive political foresight and his merits as a literary entertainer. It compares Ambler with contemporaries such as Graham Greene, W. Somerset Maugham and George Orwell and with successors such as Ian Fleming, John Le Carré and Len Deighton, showing his lasting topicality. From the 1950s his novels dealt with Islamic fundamentalism, terrorism and chemical warfare giving a thought-provoking and differentiated picture way beyond the black-and-white of the usual thriller fare. Some of his novels have just been re-published in the USA to widespread acclaim.

The biography traces Ambler's early experiences as a student, a technical engineer, an advertising agent and a music hall amateur, illuminating a youth torn between scientific scepticism and artistic fervour. It documents his first steps as a writer of poems and dramas. It assesses his deliberate attempt to reinvent the thriller genre and presents the as yet undocumented discussions with his first lecturers. It situates his early masterpieces *Epitaph of a Spy*, *The Mask of Dimitrios* and *Journey into Fear* in the political times and cultural scene of the 1930s.

A further chapter is devoted to Ambler's wartime efforts, firstly as an officer protecting Churchill's rural retreat, then as part of the Army Film Unit and his collaboration with

David Niven, Peter Ustinov and Carol Reed. The biography confronts and discusses widely different accounts by Ambler and John Huston of their war documentaries in Southern Italy, dealing with the possibilities and limits of war films in general.

For the first time Ambler's important contribution as a scriptwriter and producer to the British film industry in the 1950s and his work in Hollywood in the 1960s is documented. A dozen films which are based on Ambler scripts are analysed, for instance *The Cruel Sea* (for which he was nominated for an Oscar), *A Night to Remember* (arguably still the best film about the disaster of the Titanic), *The October Man*, *The Card* and *The Purple Plain*, all of which assembled the cream of British acting talent. These chapters are based on Ambler's wide-ranging correspondence with leading men and women of film and culture as well as on interviews with friends and contemporaries, for instance Sam Goldwyn Jr., Roy Ward Baker and Anthony Havellock-Allan.

In considering his novels, the book appreciates Ambler's constant innovation and reinvention, in dealing with post-war traumas in Eastern and Southern Europe (*Judgment on Deltchev*, *The Schirmer Inheritance*), and in being one of the first serious author, as early as the late 1950s, to deal with anti-colonial liberation movements and Islamic fundamentalism (*The Night-Comers*, *Passage of Arms*), giving a thrilling and understanding description of the clash between Eastern and Western cultures.

Furthermore the biography discusses, on the basis of newly discovered material, the part psychoanalytical experiences played in Ambler's life and how they found an expression in some of his novels, especially *A Kind of Anger*. The humorous figure of the petty criminal Arthur Simpson (played by Peter Ustinov in the film *Topkapi* by Jules Dassin) is shown as a device to deal with personal demons as well as creating an anarchic anti-hero who rebels against conformity, implicating him, in an underrated sequel, in a neo-colonial adventure in Africa (*Dirty Story*).

Although sometimes classified as a spy story writer, Ambler dealt just once, in *The Intercom Conspiracy*, with the classic Cold War setting, only to satirise the Cold War mentality and its predominant thrillers. On the other hand, his books in the 1970s pioneered discussions about Palestine and Israel (*The Levanter*) and about military

dictatorships in Latin America (*Dr Frigo*). Ambler's latest books were preoccupied with white collar crimes and money laundering (*Send No More Roses*) and the dangers of chemical warfare and terrorism in the Gulf region respectively (*The Care of Time*); subjects which have become eerily topical.

Ambler's eighteen novels have perfected the perils of the innocent abroad, the victim who becomes inadvertently but unavoidably embroiled in politics and violence, described in widely different settings and with varied stylistic means, always combining enlightenment with entertainment.

The biography establishes, on the basis of talks with many relatives and friends, Ambler's reserved but generous personality. For the first time, light is thrown on an unfinished manuscript Ambler left behind, and some of his colleagues assess his influence on their work. It is one of the aims of the book to correct a misconceived concentration on Ambler's earlier novels and to show the variety and quality of his entire body of works.

The book is illustrated with 45 pictures, some of them never before made public, as well as examples from Ambler's manuscripts, and is further enhanced by an extensive bibliography as well as a filmography and an index.

Stefan Howald: Eric Ambler. Eine Biographie. Diogenes Verlag, Zürich 2002, 593 Seiten.