

*Spies* by Michael Frayn (Faber and Faber)

There have been so many novels recently drawing on or purporting to draw on memories of a childhood under apartheid that we may be inclined to assume that this kind of inverse nostalgia is a peculiarly South African phenomenon. Even Barbara Trapido, who has lived most of her adult life in England, has chosen to set her latest novel in the South Africa of her youth. And yet, of course, the childhood-under-apartheid novel is only a local variant of a form that is as universal as childhood itself, invariably and paradoxically implying that the child's world is the adult world writ large.

Michael Frayn's *Spies*, then, is another example of the childhood-recollected-in-adulthood genre, of the sub-genre Second World War; but it is entirely original and unpredictable. Yes, it has something of *Whistling Down the Wind*, of *The Go-Between*, even of *Hope and Glory*; but its mixture of humour intrigue and real suspense is all its own.

Frayn is perhaps best known for his string of successful plays, like the hilarious *Noises Off* and the more philosophical *Copenhagen*. Yet he has written ten novels, and the previous one was short listed for the Booker Prize, the Whitbread Fiction prize and the James Tait Black Memorial prize. *Spies* itself won the regional award in the Commonwealth Writers competition. In short, he is no mean novelist either. *Spies* more than deserves the recognition it has received. It is a superb little novel, indeed little only in number of pages and lack of pretension. It

Frayn's protagonist, Stephen Wheatley, returns as an old man to the cul-de-sac where he spent the war with his family and friends, or at any rate associates – more particularly his “special” friend, the really rather dreadful Keith Hayward. The Haywards are everything the Wheatleys are not: tidy, sophisticated, sporting, and thoroughly superior to their surroundings. They are also almost totally insupportable, except that Stephen is too bedizened by the privilege of being allowed to visit to notice. “Thank you for having me,” he mutters in ritual formula whenever he goes home after a visit to the Haywards' model home, in sincere and abject gratitude. In keeping with this servile attitude he follows wherever Keith leads; and when Keith announces “My mother is a German spy,” he valiantly follows there too: “I have been granted a modest foothold of my own in the story, as the loyal squire and sword bearer that a hero requires.”

The relationship between Keith and Stephen, leader and follower, is beautifully done, bringing out not only the dumb subservience of Stephen but Keith's dependence on ‘somebody to be braver than.’

What Stephen cannot foresee is exactly where his allegiance to Keith will lead him. The plural of the book's title tips us off to the fact that there will be more than one spy involved, and indeed, of course, it soon transpires that everybody is spying on everybody. Frayn's achievement is to present with humour but without condescension the extreme seriousness of the boys in their quest, and gradually to reveal a real secret lurking under the make-believe of their game. The comedy of the boys' earnest absorption in what seems to be a wild-goose chase gradually deepens into an unsettling account of fear and loneliness; and a revelation of something more sinister than espionage in the urbane Mr Hayward's suave control of his family.

The novel thus becomes also a rite-of-passage novel, as the young Stephen (whose age we are never told) finds that he is entrusted with adult secrets that threaten to involve him in discoveries and betrayals beyond his youthful grasp. There is a loss of

innocence somewhere, but in no melodramatic event: it is a gradual loss, a slipping away, rather than a cataclysm.

Frayn skilfully keeps the reader just one step ahead of Stephen in guessing at the real identity of the German spy, and the real nature of the secret that the cool calm and collected Mrs Hayward is, in Stephen's favourite phrase, pressing to her bosom. In the end, the book becomes an enactment of the old saw that with friends like that, who needs enemies? Certainly the Germans become a pale abstraction compared with the subtle nastinesses of one's neighbours – a point made with some force when Keith threatens Stephen with the "bayonet" they have fashioned out of a carving knife, in emulation of Keith's father, who is reputed to have killed five Germans with a bayonet in the Great War. And, the novel suggests, the desire to hurt can occur even closer to home: "I have the odd idea ... that the crime he's punishing in me is not mine at all, but one that's being committed inside his own house."

*Spies* is funny and disturbing at the same time, a vivid evocation of the terrors of being a child in an adult world – or, for that matter, a child in a child's world or an adult in an adult's world. Looking back, the now aged Stephen reflects: "What we did to each other in those few years of madness! What we did to ourselves!"

Sadly, that outcry could sum up the conclusion of most novels of childhood, wherever they are set: what we do to each other and to ourselves remains the universal theme.