

Eric Ambler's fine body of work at the British Library

By Daniel Pembrey

A year ago, when I interviewed **Charlie Cumming** at the conclusion of Edinburgh Spy Week 2015, the leading spy writer announced that there would be just one more outing for Tom Kell, his secret service character. 'So what's next?' I asked him. 'I've always liked that Eric Ambler thing,' Charlie replied, 'putting an ordinary man into extraordinary circumstances, lighting the blue touch paper and seeing what happens.' It got me thinking about the grip that this character type holds over our imaginations, and its often-referenced, mysterious exponent.



Eric Ambler event at the British Library, 6th May (Bodies From the Library)

So I was delighted to attend an Eric Ambler evening occasioned by the republication of three Ambler titles as British Library Crime Classics (*The Light of Day*, *A Kind of Anger*, and *Passage of Arms*). The evening was organised by Bodies From The Library, which has been discreetly building a reputation for such events. 'The team are passionate about giving past crime fiction masters their rightful place in today's busy events calendar,' comments organiser Mike Linane. 'The republication of these titles gave the perfect opportunity to remind readers about the father of the modern spy thriller.' The event grouped together eight Ambler experts and commentators into two back-to-back panels. It was an ambitious format for a warm Friday evening in May, and a great success.

Crime critic **Jake Kerridge** began by giving an insightful overview of the author, making reference to his autobiography *Here Lies Eric Ambler*, written late in the author's life. Was there a clue in the title? Separating fact from myth promised (and delivered) much from these two panels, which comprised the authors and commentators **Martin Edwards**, **Barry Forshaw**, **Stav Sherez** and **Bill Ryan**, plus blogger **Ayo Onatade**, literary agent to the Ambler estate **Camilla Shestopal**, and **John McLaughlin**, Ambler's agent from the mid-1970s until his death.



The last panel: Jake Kerridge, Barry Forshaw, Stav Sherez, Bill Ryan

One theme was the exceptional range of experience and knowledge that Ambler drew upon. **John McLaughlin** observed that Ambler had 'read everything', and noted the use he made of his time as an engineer and copy writer for technical products, even anticipating the Atomic bomb years before its invention. Ambler's knowledge of systems was a point picked up by **Stav Sherez**, and **Bill Ryan** remarked on how this allowed Ambler to use such telling details in his descriptions.

In terms of favourite titles, it was hard for the panellists to deviate from *The Mask of Dimitrios*, although *The Light of Day* – one of the new British Library Crime Classics – was called out as an entertaining and accessible way in to Ambler's work.

Ambler's three-dimensional characterisation received due recognition, with **Ayo Onatade** speculating on these characters' degrees of choice in their extraordinary fates. **Martin Edwards** (current president of the Detection Club) noted that Ambler was a rare case of a thriller writer being admitted to the Detection Club in his day, thereby revealing the extent to which he was perceived as elevating the thriller form.

Why did he fall out of favour, when Graham Greene described him as unquestionably our best thriller writer? In 1998 (when Ambler died), none of his novels remained in print. The panellists ventured various reasons, including his lack of series characters and the modest success of film adaptations. **Barry Forshaw** pointed out the absence of sex in Ambler's stories and the challenges of drawing a younger audience, while disinterest by the author in his own writing career towards the end was also mentioned.

Eric Ambler dealt in the complicated grey middle, in sharp contrast to the more dualistic world of Ian Fleming and James Bond. It is perhaps both the reason why his books proved less popular by the turn of this century, and why their resurgence is so welcome today. Long may the ordinary person find himself (or herself) in extraordinary circumstances, in quality spy fiction at least.



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