



The creator of Johnny Fedora, Desmond Cory. He authored more than 40 novels, 16 of which featured British intelligence agent, Johnny Fedora.

BEFORE JAMES BOND CAME JOHNNY FEDORA

A look back at the espionage assignments of Johnny Fedora

A year before Ian Fleming saw his first James Bond novel published in 1952, a fictional secret agent called Johnny Fedora was already being sent by British Intelligence on secret missions. The critics described Fedora as the “thinking man's James Bond” who spends his life “dealing with the cold-blooded bastards on this earth.” In this article we will take a look back at Johnny Fedora’s assignments, and investigate just how alike these two agents were, and why they continue

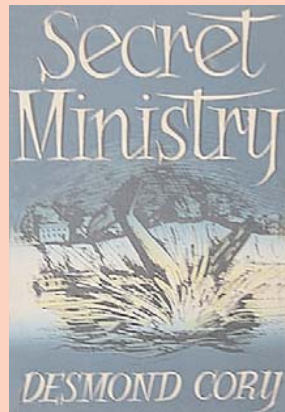
to appeal to us decades after their first publication.

In his first novel, *Secret Ministry* (1951), Fedora is part of a “team of seasoned assassins,” called together to eliminate “Gestapo men...and anybody consider[ed] better dead than alive.” Germany is defeated but a select group of Hitler’s henchmen continue to kill and maim. Their hideout is London, and Fedora’s assignment is to destroy them!

By his 13th assignment,

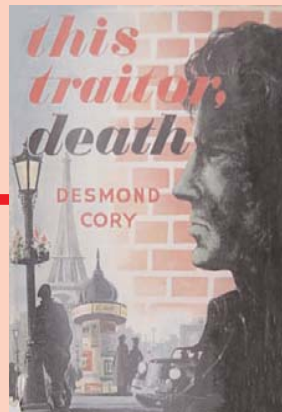
Hammerhead (1963) Johnny Fedora is halting the world’s annihilation, facing off against a cold and ruthless Russian agent (Feramontov) completely dedicated to his government’s ideals.

Echoes of James Bond novels, you might say, except we should remember here that Fedora came before Bond. Like Fleming’s 007, Fedora was very much a product of the post World War II/ Cold War period. This was a time when two groups of countries were at war



1951

Fedora’s first assignment starts in London



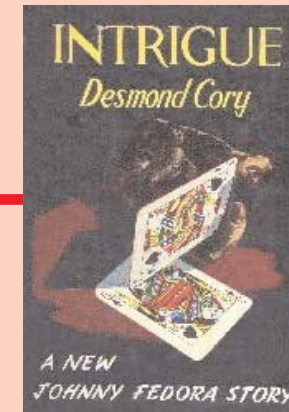
1952

Second assignment: Abroad in Paris



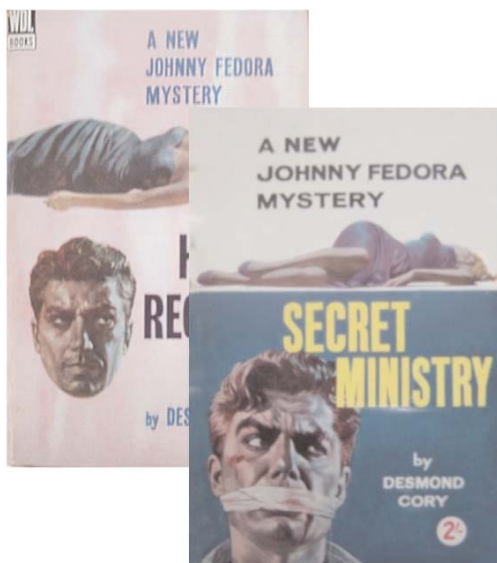
1953

Third assignment: Mission to Austria



1954

Fourth assignment: Sent to Trieste, Italy



Johnny Fedora reaches the masses through paperback editions

without actually fighting each other. For some 40 years, the East and the West spied on each other, and killed each other's spies. They fought for influence over other countries in different parts of the world, and consequently wherever British Intelligence wanted Johnny Fedora to go, he would go. As the title of many of his books show, "Johnny goes East, West, South, and North," Fedora followed the enemy no matter their location.

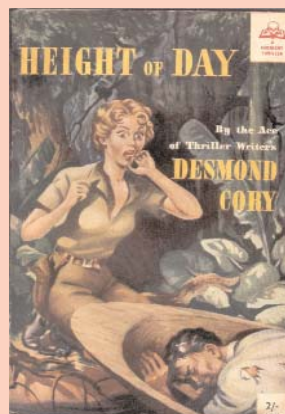
While these days are now gone, they still resonate with the society we live in today, and with the public's continued interest in the clandestine life of the secret agent.

Today, instead of the Nazi or Soviet threat, we now fret about Al-Qaeda and other extremist organisations.

Written by an ex-British Commando turned best-selling author, Desmond Cory wrote with a flourish that caught the eye of the critics. Early on, he was applauded as a possible "British Raymond Chandler," and a "writer of thrillers who really can write. He combines verve and intelligence with genuine skill in the use of words." As a consequence, Johnny Fedora novels sold more than James Bond's early publications. In fact, it was not the British public who were to ultimately decide on who was to

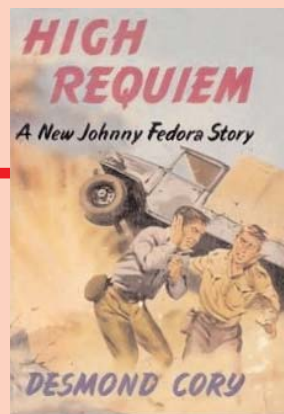
become Britain's most successful secret agent, but an American President. As Professor Marcia Songer explains:

"Even though Johnny Fedora predates James Bond, comparisons with Ian Fleming's better known hero are inevitable. Agent 007's popularity is often attributed to the admission by President John F. Kennedy that *From Russia With Love* was one of his favourite novels. After that revelation in 1957, sales of the Fleming spy novel soared. Seven years later when [Cory's] *Hammerhead* was republished in the United States as *Shockwave*, the book jacket carried



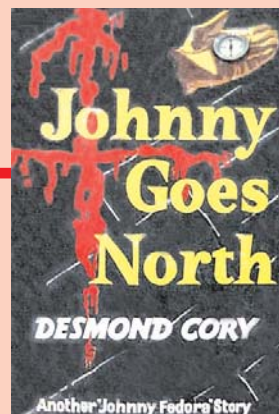
1956

Fifth assignment: Out in Africa



1957

Sixth assignment: Sabotage in Africa 1956



1957

Seventh assignment: From Italy to Sweden



1957

Eighth assignment: Adventure in remote Tibet

"For my money, Johnny Fedora, professional killer for British Intelligence, more than deserves to take over James Bond's avid audience."

Anthony Boucher,
New York Times

a quote from Anthony Boucher of the New York Times saying that Johnny Fedora "more than deserves to take over James Bond's avid audience." Reviews of *Feramontov* and Ian Fleming's *Octopussy* appeared side by side in the New York Times Book Review of 1966. Of *Feramontov* a reviewer said, "As one has come to expect from Cory, colorful action, copious carnage, elaborate intrigue, frequent surprises." *Octopussy*, however, was dismissed as "a thin and even emaciated volume."

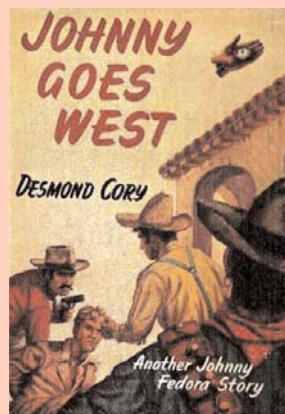
In order to better understand how Johnny Fedora novels are actually quite different to those of James

Bond, we need to look at one of his novels. In this case, let's look at *Johnny Goes South*, the 10th Fedora novel, first published in 1959 and later published again a number of times in the 1960s as *Overload*. Fedora is called to South America by a leading dictator called Tocino. Although he is occasionally on the delivering end of a bullet, Fedora's job this time is to assure that Tocino's top rival survives a probable assassination attempt.

As with most spy fiction, there are plenty of twists and sub-plots ahead in this story. For one thing, Tocino has a sexually voracious

daughter named Adriana whose body Cory describes in loving detail. At first glance, the elements may seem familiar. Fedora shares some of Bond's familiar traits. Both are from humble backgrounds, with a tendency to use as few words as possible. Cory also uses a similar number of Fleming characteristics, such as exotic locations. But while the packaging appears to be similar, the contents are strikingly different. For one thing, the action here falls well short of the fast-paced, techno-gadgetry we associate with Bond movies.

This is because Cory is less concerned with pace, and more



1958

Ninth assignment:
Investigations
in Venezuela



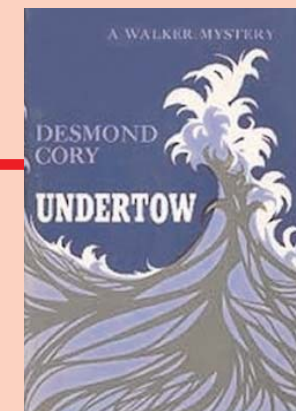
1959

Tenth assignment:
Intrigue in
Argentina



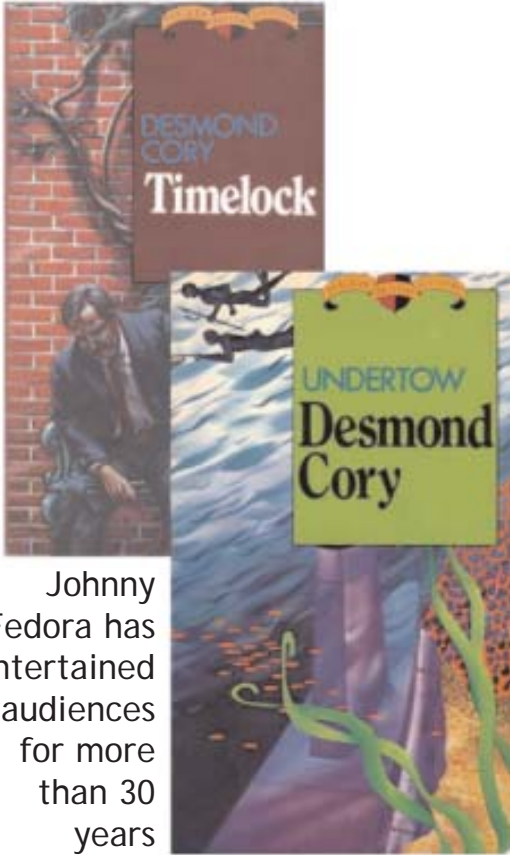
1960

Eleventh assignment:
Adventure in
Spain



1962

Twelfth assignment:
Hunting
Nazi treasure
in Spain



Johnny Fedora has entertained audiences for more than 30 years

concerned in delivering a thriller with brains. After cleverly developing the situation, Cory drops (yet again) Fedora in the thick of it, letting him figure out for himself a way out. The action is often slow, Fedora methodically trying to get the opponent to crack under interrogation. It's less exciting than seeing him take on three enemy gunmen, but it's gripping in its own way.

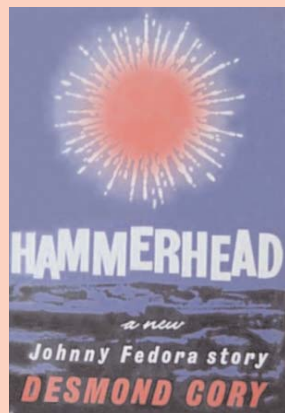
Johnny Goes South, as with many other Federa novels, falls closer to Graham Greene (whose *England Made Me* Cory wrote the screenplay when filmed in 1973) than Ian Fleming. Similar to Greene, Cory avoids the melodrama of many

secret agent novels where routine destruction is in abundance. Instead, Cory novels are written in lean, realistic prose, having often clever and exciting plots, and achieving almost a cinematic visual realism in its description. Rather than fast-paced action, Cory concentrates on portraying the characters' internal lives, the mental, emotional, and spiritual. Usually, the characters around Fedora are internally troubled, with Fedora himself showing his own frailities from time to time.

Like Greene (and others such as Norman Mailer), the world of men with secret lives is for Cory a vehicle in which to explore a

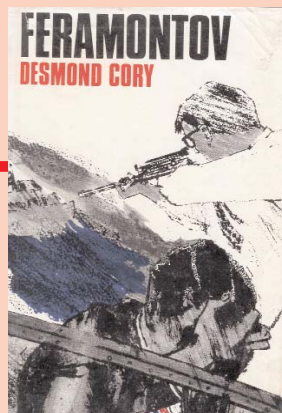
number of themes, particularly the psychological and the sexual. Cory was in fact to develop the psychological theme further after Fedora, penning a number of psychological thrillers that included *Deadfall*, which was later made into a 20th Century Fox film starring Michael Caine.

Like other secret agent novels, there are political undertones in Fedora's novels, although on the whole Cory is far less vocal than others in expressing them. All the more surprising, given Fedora's background. Born of a Spanish father and Irish mother, Fedora "got himself mixed up with the IRA on one side and the Spanish civil war



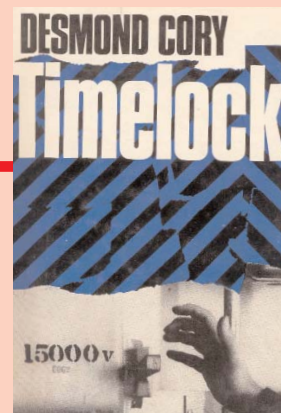
1963

Thirteenth assignment: Russian threat continues in Spain



1966

Fourteenth assignment: Danger in the Costa Brava



1967

Fifteenth assignment: Lost with amnesia in Spain



1971

Sixteenth assignment: Facing a military coup in Spain

on the other.” Due to his father's Republican tendencies, The Falangists killed both his parents.

It is understandable to learn that Fedora is driven as much by a need to avenge the death of his parents than patriotism or loyalty to British Intelligence. Yet, despite this, Cory expresses no strong political opinions either way, preferring to

explore the emotional and psychological conflicts that live in the characters of his novels.

Politics always remains a small undercurrent in Fedora novels. For example, the last five Fedora books (sometimes called the Feramontov Quintet) are mostly based in Spain. Some might consider this a strange choice to depict the cold-war

conflict between the East and West, yet Spain was at that time a target for the Communist cause. Like Pakistan or Turkey today, Spain wanted to appease the West while showing political tendencies not favored by the capitalistic West. Just as Cuba turned out to be a communist country on the doorstep of America, Spain could go the same way.

Hence why Feramontov, a Soviet secret operative and Fedora’s archrival, targets Madrid for nuclear annihilation, putting in place new political leadership that would favour the Communists.

Thankfully, Cory never lingers on the political theme, and instead focuses on the rivalry that emerges between Fedora and Feramontov. The Feramontov quintet includes *Undertow*, *Hammerhead*, *Feramontov*, *Timelock*, and *Sunburst*, and throughout, these highly skilled agents pit their wits against each other, similar to Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Moriarity.

So why do comparisons between Fedora and Cory abound? Well, this

was probably more due to Cory’s publicists and the press than anyone else. The James Bond phenomena was so huge in the 60s and 70s that all espionage writers were being compared to Fleming. Below are just some examples of how critics reviewed Fedora’s novels:

“For my money, Johnny Fedora, professional killer for British Intelligence, more than deserves to take over James Bond’s avid audience.” - Anthony Boucher, New York Times 1965.

“As fast, furious and horrifying as anything in this Bond age.” - The Times 1966.

“Johnny Fedora is the ‘thinking man’s James Bond’ who spends his life ‘dealing with the cold-bloodiest bastards on this earth.’ ” - Books and Bookmen 1966

“Full of Bondish ingredients - sex, sudden death, expertise - which had me glued to the last half till the small hours.” - The Spectator 1967

“Desmond Cory seems to me to accomplish precisely what Fleming was aiming at. This is a sexy, colourful, glamorous story, written

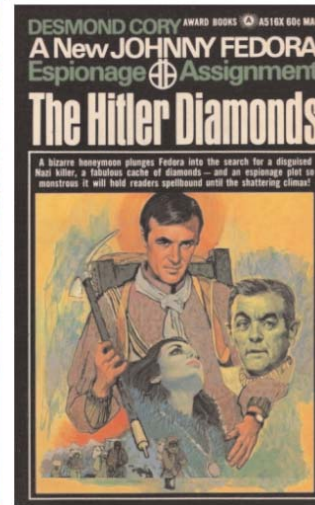
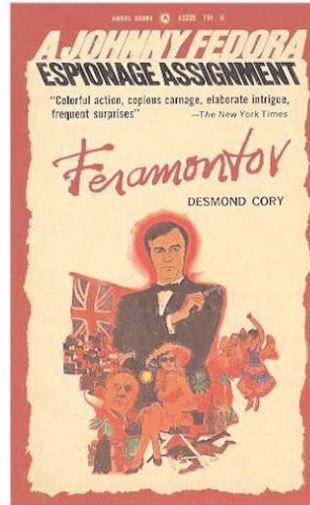
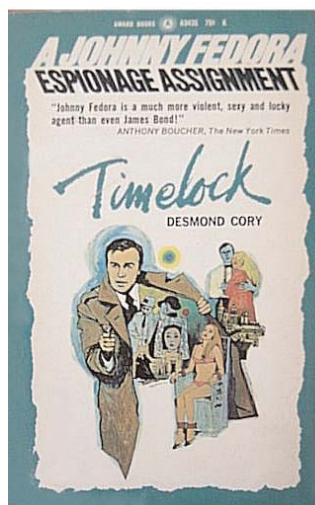
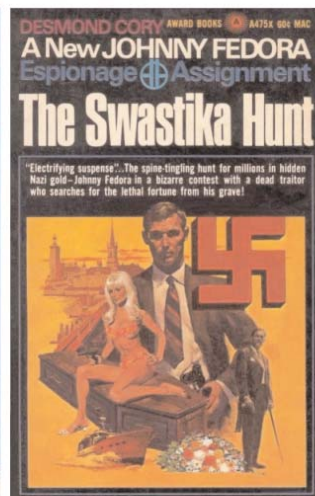
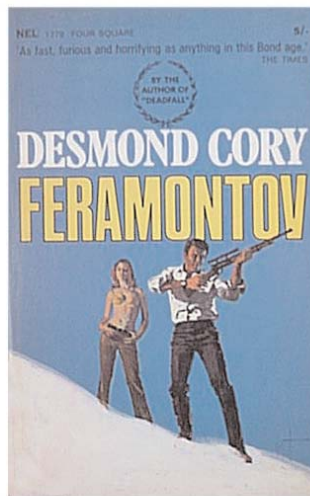
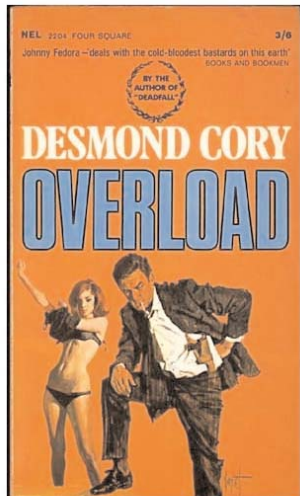
The novels of Johnny Fedora:

| Original Title | Also published as |
|--|-----------------------------------|
| <u>Secret Ministry (1951, 1957)</u> | <u>The Nazi Assassins (1970)</u> |
| <u>This Traitor, Death (1952, 1957)7</u> | <u>The Gestapo File (1971)</u> |
| <u>Dead Man Falling (1953, 1957)</u> | <u>The Hitler Diamonds (1969)</u> |
| <u>Intrigue (1954, 1957)</u> | <u>Trieste (1968)</u> |
| <u>Height of Day (1955)</u> | <u>Dead Men Alive (1969)</u> |
| <u>High Requiem (1955, 1957, 1969)</u> | |
| <u>Johnny Goes North (1956, 1961)</u> | <u>The Swastiza Hunt (1969)</u> |
| <u>Johnny Goes East (1957)</u> | <u>Mountainhead (1966, 1968)</u> |
| <u>Johnny Goes West (1958, 1966, 1967, 1968)</u> | |
| <u>Johnny Goes South (1959,1964, 1966)</u> | <u>Overload (1966, 1968)</u> |
| <u>The Head (1960)</u> | |
| <u>Undertow (1962,1963,1965, 1966, 1969, 1983)</u> | |
| <u>Hammerhead (1963)</u> | <u>Shockwave(1964, 1965,1966)</u> |
| <u>Feramontov (1966, 1968)</u> | |
| <u>Timelock (1967, 1968, 1984)</u> | |
| <u>Sunburst (1971)</u> | |

with finesse, economy, humour, and full and inventive plotting." - New York Times 1967

"Meet the most savagely exciting

secret agent since Nick Carter and James Bond. Johnny Fedora is cool and ruthlessly efficient" - Personal Book Guide 1968.



The many faces of Johnny Fedora

Even in his early assignments, we find in Fedora a maturity not found in many of the 1960s secret agents such as James Bond. For Fedora it is not all fast-cars, lovely women, and the elimination of enemy agents, even if there is a fair share of all of these. One characteristic that marks Fedora out from other fictional agents is his skill as a talented pianist. Through music he finds escape from the real and brutal world of the assassin.

"Every time he played [the piano] Johnny found himself .. far removed from his existence where he handled a gun with an efficiency that was cold and hard and completely disillusioned."

This disillusionment is something you rarely see in this genre until the post-Bond era (or counter Fleming period) when authors such as Len Deighton and Le Carré showed the darker side of espionage work. In this respect, Desmond Cory and his characters (such as Fedora) are arguably ahead of their contemporaries.

The same can be said of Cory's

portrayal of women. It is true that Cory has a propensity to describe the physical attributes of many female characters in notable detail (like many other espionage authors) but from the early Fedora novels right through to the last assignments in the 60s and 70s, the main female characters are developed in some detail, and play an important role in the plots. Many of these women may on the surface be portrayed as sultry and provocative, but underneath they are far more complex. Their role also varies a great deal from novel to novel. In *This Traitor, Death* (1952), the reader is introduced to Le Rossignol (The Nightingale), Hitler's most beautiful and ruthless spy. In most espionage novels, few (if any) get the upper hand over the main protagonist, whether it is Bond or Matt Helm (America's version of Bond). Not so with Desmond Cory novels, and ultimately it is another female character who has to rescue Fedora from Le Rossignol.

In *Johnny Goes North* (1956), Signora Holmgren appears at first to be the typical attractive brunette

found in any Bond movie, but instead she turns out to be an intelligent and very capable agent working undercover. Other female characters such as Adriana (who first appeared in *Johnny Goes South*), Estelle (in *Undertow* and *Feramontov*) and Laura (in *Feramontov* and *Timelock*) appear in multiple Fedora novels, and each has a depth of character rarely seen in secret agent novels.

Critics such as Anthony Boucher called Fedora “a much more persuasive violent, sexy and lucky agent than James Bond.” This was

not so much due to the physical attractiveness of the women around Fedora, but the depth of character they showed which made them both more seductive and intriguing.

In summary, Johnny Fedora novels are quite different from those of James Bond. Behind the secret agent was a skilled writer who sought his own mark on the genre of the secret agent.

In 1960, the Bristol Evening Post wrote of Cory:

“There is these days a comparatively slender band of first-class writers who are producing

thrillers worthy of serious attention. Among them, too, is Desmond Cory, a man whose ingenuity, imagination, and good humour pervade his works with an agreeable excitement and read-ability.”

In 1993, just when Cory was publishing his last novels, the press wrote:

“You hear that there was a Golden Age of thrillers in Britain between the wars. When you read Cory you realize that it hasn’t ended.”

The publication dates of Johnny Fedora novels range from 1951 to 1984. For a fictional character that

entertained audiences for over 30 years, it is perhaps surprising that publishers have not looked to re-publish Johnny Fedora again. The appeal of the secret agent is as strong today as it was back in the 1950s, and with Johnny Fedora you can’t really go to far wrong.

“Colorful action, copious carnage, elaborate suspense, frequent surprises...Johnny Fedora is a much more sexy and lucky agent than James Bond.” These were the words the New York Times used to describe Fedora novels. Who could ask for anything more?

Other books and articles covering Desmond Cory/Johnny Fedora:

The Evolution of Desmond Cory: by Prof. M. Songer (2002)

Biography - McCarthy, Shaun (Lloyd): An article from: Contemporary Authors - published by Thompson Gale (April 26, 2006)

Detecting Men: A Reader’s Guide and Checklist for Mystery Series Written By Men: by Willetta Heising (Dec 1998)

Crime Fiction II: A Comprehensive Bibliography, 1749-1990 by Allen J. Hubin (1994)

Dictionary of Literary Biography: 276 British Mystery & Thriller Writers by Gina MacDonald (Mar 2003)

British Mystery and Thriller Writers Since 1940: First Series by Bernard Benstock (Hardcover - Sep 1989)

Whodunnit? A Guide To Crime, Suspense & Spy Fiction: by H.R.F. Keating (1982)

Graham Greene: A Literary Life: by Neil Sinyard (2004)

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New York Times