

ENGLISH: *SPIES*

Memory is part fact, part self-deception.

Spies Book Review

Spies by Michael Frayn is an intriguing novel that explores the fallible nature of memory of an old man, as he is drawn to his own childhood by the unusual scent of the common garden plant, privet. This then leads to a vivid yet questionably accurate recollection of his childhood, particularly the events leading up to and occurring after the innocent accusation made by the narrator's best friend that his mother is a German spy. Frayn's ability to create a detailed account of not only the events themselves, but the process by which the narrator, Stephen, recollects these events allude to the larger issue of the misrepresentation of reality obtained by exploring the dark crevices of 'memory lane'.

At its core, *Spies* is a typical coming of age novel and, consequently, explores the mental transition of a young, pre-pubescent boy as he attempts to understand and step into the world of adulthood. Despite this, the way that Frayn pieces together the events of the novel and the lengths that he painstakingly goes through in order to establish place and time gives the story a philosophical depth in the revelation of, perhaps, a more important idea – the very nature of memory. Frayn has an older version of the protagonist, Stephen, open the novel in first person in retrospect and the rest of the novel unfolds as this old man recollects his own childhood. To be specific, what Stephen feels is nostalgia, an intense longing for the past triggered by elements in his present environment that, sometimes irrationally, remind him of past events. Though the cause of nostalgia is only vaguely understood by the science of psychology, there is no doubt that the feelings and memory that it evokes can be intense. Nostalgia can conjure an almost dreamlike and intensely comprehensive depiction of past events and this is simply a result how detailed our memories can be, even if what we think we remember is not entirely true. However, the experience of nostalgia is seldom a random event as our mind, in all of its complexity, require certain links in order to summon forth a memory. The particular rush of memories that Stephen experiences is triggered by elements in his environment which include the smell of the common plant, privet, and the sound of trains in the background as he explores the vicinity of his childhood home. These triggers, or anchors as referred to in common psychology, alludes to the fascinating ways that our minds link present and past and present events and shows a glimpse of just how powerful our minds can be.

The plot of the novel is cleverly nuanced with the very uncertainty that comes from remembering the past. Frayn details the process the Stephen goes through in trying to piece together glimpses of events in his mind in order to obtain a logical, coherent whole. The occasional transitions to a third person point of view and the tiresome yet fascinating reshuffling of events reveal to the audience the inexplicable problematic nature of memory. As a consequence, the very fabric of reality of the past that Stephen recalls is questioned at every turning point of the novel. At points in the novel, Frayn shifts the focus from narrating the events and building suspense in order to deal with the unreliability of memory in order to add a unique twist to the novel and to raise questions about the exact manners by which our minds work. There is no doubt that our mind is proficient in recalling the past, but whether the entirety of our memory is real rather than partially made up is regularly questioned in the novel. This alludes to the proclivity of our mind to forsake the objective truth and, instead, create a skewed version of reality. Thus, *Spies* explores one of the quintessential flaw of the human condition – the inability to discern fact from fiction. Our own minds can choose to deliberately deceive themselves for the purpose of protecting our egos, as can be seen when we remember events differently from other people or the differing yet completely truthful accounts of crimes made by different witnesses. This is also explicitly shown in *Spies* when Keith's mother comments that 'Keith is easily led', contradicting Stephen's description of Keith's rather domineering character.

This leads to the underlying question that many readers will be asking themselves once they have finished reading the novel: 'Everything that we'd once taken for granted now seems open to question'. There is certainly an element of falsity running throughout the novel, but could the entirety of Stephen's past be completely falsified and imagined? There are certainly inconsistencies in the narration of the events and Stephen even admits that there is little he recognises of his past self and that the images he imagines only come from photos taken in the past. Rene Descartes, renowned philosopher, argues that while there is no definite way of distinguishing dream and reality, dreams are reflections of reality so there are common elements between these two alternate universes. These ideas echo in Frayn's writing, especially in the appearance of the policeman, who Stephen is able to remember but not tie to a particular time in his childhood past. This seems to be a conceited effort on Frayn's part to explicitly question the deception of our memory and to advise his audience to take heed of the particular ways in which our minds can 'invent' a past. Few people are aware of the processes our minds go through in order to interpret events that come from both the external and internal environment and these mental distortions can, occasionally, lead to an untrue account of what has happened in the past. Despite the deception that is an inherent part of being human, the adult Stephen is able to enjoy and feel satisfied after the reliving of past events and this shows that the accuracy of events is not necessarily of significance when one is tormented by the past like Stephen is. What matters is the ability to be satisfied and content with one's life and to be able to acknowledge that one has lived his life to the fullest of his expectations.

Frayn's novel *Spies* is, at the surface, a foray into the mind of a child as he lives the events of his espionage dream in which he believes in so intensely due to the context of his time. However, what Frayn is able to imply from the subtleties of his writing, a question here and a thought there, is the larger issue of the problematic nature of memory. It is not in the power of humans to discern fact from deception when dealing with our own minds, but what Frayn perhaps is saying, is that this is not important. What is important, is that we understand why our minds differently, why we tend to distort memories, so that when we endeavour to remember the past, we are aware that some of what we remember is just simply, self-deception.