

'Dr Fischer of Geneva' Or There's so Much More to Christmas Crackers

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In 1931 Graham Greene was playing Honegger's *Pacific 321* on his gramophone as he contemplated the writing of *Stamboul Train*. In the urgent drumming of the wheels, he imagined himself steaming towards Istanbul, caught in an adventure involving frontiers. It was, said Vivien, one of their favorite records in their cottage in Chipping Campden.¹ Forty-eight years later, in 1979, it was Mozart's *Jupiter Symphony* that had caught Greene's mind. This record provided a point of reference in *Dr. Fischer*, and Greene celebrates the violinist Heifetz, who was almost exactly his contemporary.

Greene liked music, and this symphony is an important strand in *Dr. Fischer of Geneva*. The music of Mozart is the antithesis to Greene's spiritual quest. The music resolves uncertainties, is complete in itself, and soothes the edges of our lives. Perhaps that is why Greene is drawn to it, for he, in his writing, is intent more on exploring than on resolving. In his exploring he takes us with him and that is, perhaps, the reason why we read Greene and find his work enduring. But in the end he, and we, all seek

some resolution to life's uncertainties. About God we cannot absolutely know. In Love we do not quite achieve. With Power we may for a while divert ourselves. With Death we become increasingly familiar. Greene rubs these themes between thumb and finger.

Death sits at the center of *Dr. Fischer*. In Jones's company, we and Graham sit in our reflective later days (Graham was 75), with our coffee and our memories—a photo or two, and a chair once sat in—"as often as you do these things you shall do them in memory of me." Who is the "me"? We shall explore that "me." The music plays. In it we find some comforting completeness. Woody Allen is reported to have said that this symphony proved the existence of God. Possibly Greene found the same to be true.

Stamboul Train was an earnest of what was to come with Greene. With novel after novel the same ingredients are taken out and dusted. In *Dr. Fischer*, 1980, they are rehearsed again, but the urgent movement has gone; the story is simplified; it is all compact and ritualized. There is the same bright-eyed interest, the same glint of humor, but there is a greater economy, a composure. It is a novella—shorter, tight, only 140 pages long. The ideas still twist and turn. What else should we expect of Greene—the fidget over words, semantics, theology; but the storyline is simple, uncluttered, almost static. Plot is less extravagant and demanding. We may see Greene's thoughtful, honest face, and that of Fr. Leopoldo Duran, his Jesuit confessor, to whom ideas were tossed. We can feel at home here in a room as simple and as bare as Greene's flat in Antibes: Minimalism, but never of the mind—that is until the music lends composure.

¹ Sherry, Norman. *The Life of Graham Greene, Volume I: 1904-1939*. New York: Penguin, 1989, 408.

The great power, the great attraction of a Greene novel is in engagement. The novel and the author interrelate, react. Greene is writing about his time, about his ideas at that moment when he feels age is creeping, and about the scenes. Scenes that he knew intimately well, and that his daughter remembered years later. The novel and Greene are compellingly synonymous and personal. Reality and symbolism merge, and there is always the deeper, longer intellectual vertebration that draws you onwards. Something allegorical, mythical, arresting lurks in the spare and focused narrative.

Dr. Fischer of Geneva can be viewed from different perspectives. The double title is intriguing. Already the possibilities of dialectic. *Dr. Fischer of Geneva*—the distinguished public figure! And *The Bomb Party*—Terrorism, or a hoax? What is the association? The nexus poses questions. Playfully Greene engages his reader. It's a martini, a fix—cocaine, opium—and much more legal. With this in mind, it is a surprise that this little book has not been more considered. Here is a mature Greene statement. We can be even more amazed that that omnium—gatherum biographer, Norman Sherry, does not even mention the novel.

Because the story is so pared down and focused, we have time to mull over the implications of its components: love, two house parties, two deaths, humiliation, and ultimate power of (one sort or another.) A reader may come to the novel from all Greene's previous work and be aware of his patterns of thought and predilection.

It is always fun to know how a story was born. Greene's daughter, Caroline Bourget, was present at that creative moment, and is our source of information. The occasion was a Christmas Eve dinner at her house

in Vevey. Greene was there with his grandsons, Andrew and Jonathan. At the end of the dinner the boys pulled the crackers, and Graham conceived the idea that one of the crackers might not just bang, but explode. The other crackers might hold jewels or something of value. The boys joined in with suggestions of what they would like from their crackers. But one cracker was to be explosive. Greed is weighed against fear. We are back to Russian roulette² and that frisson of excitement to which Greene returns again and again. Suddenly, he has the focus for the story—the Bomb Party.

The instigator of this party is Dr. Fischer. He is immensely wealthy, his money coming from world-wide sales of Dentophil Bouquet. His wife, Anna, has died. Embittered Fischer, dead to Pity, now takes a sadistic delight in humiliating a few rich "Toads," as his daughter calls them, obsequious time servers. How far will greed overcome a sense of humiliation? He sees it as a research project.

Alfred Jones (whose story it is and through whose eyes we see everything) has a humble position translating letters for a Chocolate Company. Chocolate ruins the teeth, but Dentophil Bouquet keeps teeth white and sparkling. The two men are opposites in many ways, but not entirely. Always, with Greene, one must watch out for the similarities of opposites. Jones marries Fischer's daughter, Anna-Luise, and it is through her that the two opposites are brought together.

Fischer throws lavish parties for the Toads, and almost by chance Jones is included in the guest list. The parties center on the willingness of the guests to be humiliated for material gain. The Toads, rich already, are hooked, but will Jones, the ordinary man with the ordinary name, sell his dignity? Anna-Luise begs him not

² Ibid., 121, 126.

to accept the invitation to the party that becomes, in this first instance for him, the Porridge Party. Fischer tries to humiliate Jones, but Jones remains aloof and scornful. He preserves his independence of will. He cannot be bought. Then, Anna-Luise is killed in a skiing accident. The final party is the Bomb Party. The guests dip into a bran tub for crackers. Five of the crackers contain checks worth two million francs; one contains a bomb—so we are told. Greed versus Fear. Jones is different. Out of misery for lost love he now might be bought by Death; he can be swayed by Grief. The others simply want the loot. That is the brief résumé of the plot.

The setting is important. Greene is always good on that envelope of reality. He sets this story in and around Vevey, in Switzerland. Fisher is spelled in the Swiss way—Fischer—and the name is important—Greene was very adamant that he wanted that particular name. He always chose names carefully and asked his daughter to check that there was not a real Dr. Fischer in the Geneva directory. He did not want the trouble that he had had with J.B. Priestley, who had threatened to sue over the first print run of *Stamboul Train*; but Graham did want this name. We will return to it.

Caroline says that Fischer's house was based on a house they all once visited at Mies, near Geneva. The house was owned by Robert Schwab, who owned a chain of shops called Contis. Alfred Jones worked for the great chocolate firm in Vevey. Nestlé, of course: its administrative center is in Vevey. The Swiss ski slopes, "Les Diablerets" and "Les Paccots," were well known to the Greene family. This

precision of place is typical of Greene. It is the backcloth of his life. Wherever he went all was relevant. He took note.

Once again we find the old specter and tease of suicide. Mrs. Faverjon, one of the Toads, has committed suicide. She was fond of birds and the Quail Party upset her. Having lost his wife, Jones contemplates how he might most easily commit suicide. He does not have the courage to jump from his office building. Whisky and tablets?—possibly; a car accident would involve others; he has no gun³; starvation?—perhaps. . . like the Mayor of Cork in 1920 but that would take too long; drowning?—Lake Léman is nearby, but Jones has a phobia about water; gas?—but he was all electric.⁴

We remember how Graham swam in the school swimming pool, having swallowed, he says, twenty aspirins.⁵ Even the Divisionaire makes his contribution to the theme: "When I was a boy, I used to play at Russian roulette with a cap pistol. It was very exciting."⁶ We have heard it all before. We turn the pages and there is a sense of déjà vu. The miserable Jones searches for a method, "Without too much pain for myself or too much unpleasantness for others."

Describing Jones's experience in the Blitz, Graham relives his *own* wartime experiences. Jones lost a hand and his parents. He tells the vivid story of fire-fighting near The Bank of England and on the Tottenham Court Road. This was Graham's beat as, first, the bombs in 1940, and, then, the V.1s exploded. Jones, on fire warden duty, was reading an anthology called *The Knapsack*. He recalls the poem that he was reading when the bomb dropped. It was Keats' *Ode to a Grecian Urn*.

3 Ibid., 108.

4 Ibid., 109.

5 Greene, Graham. *A Sort of Life*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1971, 86.

6 Ibid., 126.

Like the Mozart music, the poetry provides a point of reference outside time:

Bold lover, never, never, canst thou kiss,
Though winning near the goal—yet do not
grieve: She cannot fade though thou hast
not thy bliss . . . ” Thy streets for evermore
will silent be . . .

Death holds ultimate resolution. There is the sublimation which transcends our mortal anxieties. The clues are there.

Frequently in Greene’s writing there are echoes of that other favorite poet, Robert Browning. In this book the nod of recognition might be to *My Last Duchess*. There is a picture on Fischer’s stairway of a woman holding a skull. Like the Duke in the poem, Fischer has the same lordly inability to accept it that there can be love between his wife, Anna, and another man—Steiner.

“She preferred his company to mine.”
Then all smiles stopped together
There she stands
As if alive.

There is the echo of furtive shuffling of Secret Service documents, Skoda, arms deals, and financial laundering. Palestine, Iran.⁷ In some strangely knotted business on which Kips is engaged, we can detect the scheming of Greene’s MI6 days.

And Dreams: Greene recorded all his dreams in four notebooks. In Jones’s dream, Fischer is standing, black-suited, beside an empty grave.⁸ “Strange how one can be affected all day by a dream” says Jones, says Greene. The sad Fischer of dreams almost takes over from the bloodless manipulator.

Dentists are another theme that recurs. Jones helps in the manufacture of tooth-deströying confectionary; dentists and decay are balanced. Greene was always concerned about his teeth, and teeth are a subject of interest in the novels. Belmont—the name of one of the Toads who is a tax specialist—is also the name of a large Swiss dental business dating from the 1920s that makes equipment and dentist chairs. Belmont can make your tax returns look clean and sparkling—the flashing full set of deception. Graham’s sense of humor never deserts him.

In all these allusions it is as if Greene is playing a game. The man who preferred to be private and anonymous is saying “Find me if you can.” It is like one of those games that the Greene family played in Old Hall in School House at Christmas time: Catch-as-catch-can or Blindman’s Bluff. He enjoys the game; and the reader, once he cottons on, can enjoy it too. Sudden similarities give realism to the apparently insignificant. One little instance is that Fischer, being powerful, can afford to be dismissive of the telephone. “‘He very much dislikes the telephone,’ says Albert.”⁹ This was true, too, of Charles Greene, Graham’s headmaster father. Both preferred to maintain distance.

Through the book runs the theme of the contrived practical joke, even such a joke as Graham loved to play. The actual Bomb Party is his imaginative triumph as well as Fischer’s. We can find in this book all the characteristics of a Greene novel. They are often the playful moments of nostalgia, but they are weighted here with the seriousness of a lifetime’s thinking. They serve also to show the integrity of Graham’s life from beginning to end.

⁷ Ibid., 76.

⁸ Ibid., 66.

⁹ Ibid., 98.

Greene's preoccupation with tax was a more weighty legacy from his past. He settled in Antibes, and in Switzerland because he was a tax exile. His whole life had taken a turn for the worse because of the devious tax laundering of his adviser, Tom Windsor Roe. Greene was always concerned about money. The "Rich" Greenes had so much of it; the "Intellectual" Greenes had too little. Always for Greene it was a matter of maximizing what he could earn. In later life he would ask his accountant what he was worth. Englishmen don't have money, we learn in the novel. He need not have worried. By this time in his life, Greene was very comfortably placed, but tax is nevertheless a theme. Tom Roe was bad news; the Royal Victorian Sausage Company and the Cadco Pig Project were bad news. Roe went to prison. He had mismanaged the affairs also of Charlie Chaplin and Noel Coward, but they already lived abroad, and so were less affected.

Dr. Fischer, then, harps on tax avoidance—and on keeping teeth and bank credit white, with a flashing smile. Tax, the fisc, evasion, investments, Switzerland, special cantonal arrangements, War Loans—they pay no English tax. It would be better if the Bomb Party checks were not signed. Mrs. Montgomery and Belmont discuss safe "bonds." Fischer can be aloof from mere worldly tax matters because he has so much that money matters do not trouble him. Lawyers and police are his agents. The theme of manipulating money is an obsession: it runs through the book like an insistent income tax demand. Jones is safe because he is poor. But is he poor enough? Riches and Poverty are another duality.

One other person who had harmed Greene in youthful days was Kenneth Richmond,

the psychoanalyst. What started as a benign and liberating influence had turned sour. The bent tax adviser—Tom Roe in real life—becomes Belmont in the book. One might wonder if the name "Richmond" is lurking somewhere in Greene's mind. The names are similar: the characters superimposed. Names were carefully chosen: they had a significance to Greene.

Indirectly, it was because of Roe that *Dr. Fischer* is set in Switzerland. Greene makes Art out of Necessity. It has already been said: our author recycles everything. Everything is reinvested—for the story primarily—but the actual financial investment in a new book was not irrelevant.

On the subject of names, let us round up the field. Jones, as a name, is a favorite with Greene. We have met him before in the *Comedians*. There, Brown and Smith were his companions. Jones in this novel is sometimes miscalled Smith. These are all names to sign furtively in a hotel register. Jones is the ordinary man; and with the Christian name, Alfred, he is on the edge of being ever-so-slightly ludicrous, more so if it had been Aelfred:

The Christian name . . . belonged exclusively now to the working class and was usually abbreviated to Alf.¹⁰

Shorn of its "Mr." the name is horribly indeterminate. Jones is a Welsh name but Fischer asks him about porridge!

"I understand that the Welsh—no, no, I remember, Jones—I mean the Scots—consider it a blasphemy to spoil their porridge with sugar."¹¹

It is all part of Dr. Fischer's plan to unsettle and humiliate. Mrs. Montgomery gets his

¹⁰ Ibid., 12.

¹¹ Ibid., 57.

name wrong. The servant, Albert, equally proletarian, forgets Jones's name. That is the final insult.

Jones is a pawn, a mere translator, an earner of only 3,000 francs a month, but capable of love and honor. He is contented and complete in his little world. His father was all right because he was Sir Frederick Jones. He had a handle on his commonplace name, just the same as with Greene who had an uncle, Sir William Graham Greene. Jones, then, has similarities with Greene, and so does Fischer, though the two in many ways seem opposites. Fischer does have that distinctive title: he is "of Geneva." It gives him a handle: Kitchener of Khartoum, Lawrence of Arabia. Big men can use mere surnames with impunity.

We shall consider the name "Fischer" later.

Of the other names there is less to say but always I suspect that Greene had some reason for his choices. Kips, the international lawyer, looks like a figure "7" written in the continental way with a bar across. He looks like his written initial, a capital "K." Spare, gaunt, angle-armed, head down, looking for dropped money: Kips Krupp. Greene associates the names, and he remarks that the latter was as subservient to Hitler as the former is to Fischer.

Divisionnaire Krueger is Swiss. The name is Germanic, sounding of militarism and resolution. The name has money associations. But the man is old and his high military rank means little in a determinedly neutral country. He has never heard gunfire, and pathetically shuns risking himself in a bomb explosion. He likes being referred to as "General," although he is not a General.

Had Greene anyone in mind with Richard Deane, the film actor? He knew plenty of failed actors only too willing to boast of their own successes:

"Did you by any chance see me in '*The Beaches of Dunkirk*'? . . . I think it was quite the best film I ever made."

"I will go, sir, if I may go alone."¹²

Deane was proud of that line: he had introduced it himself.

Richard Burton? The drinking would fit. "What about Basil Dean?" suggested Neil Sinyard when I asked him. "He directed the screenplay for *21 Days*; Greene had scant regard for him." What of the premature ejaculation? What does Graham know about someone? He is amusing himself with a private joke.

Montgomery was a name Greene had used before. Here, she is the blue-rinse American. Greene recycles names for reasons that are probably now lost to us. One can never assume that with Greene anything is casual. Everything is weighed, deliberate.

This brings me to Steiner, the stone, the man whom Fischer flung aside, the man who loved both music and Anna. At the very end, standing together in the darkness of a New Year morning are Fischer, Jones, and Steiner. Steiner is the 'hard place' that Fischer cannot penetrate or understand. They stand face to face. In a minute there is a shot, and Fischer is dead. The "stone" remains. Jones remains. Not happy, but the two of them survive to hand on . . . something.

We immediately recognize the Greene polarities, the opposites, and the rivalries

¹² Ibid., 114.

that are gradually drawn together: strength balanced against weakness; power against ordinariness, poverty against wealth, decay against cleanliness, Chocolates against Dentophil Bouquet, Love against Hate. Eventually it is God matched with Satan, the two sides of the famous green baize door, point-counterpoint. Greene works by sharp oppositions. By indirections he finds directions out, not final answers, but directions. And this is what is so fascinating about this book. Greene never patronizes by telling us "What is" but "What might be."

And along that path we now travel. The central counterpoint is between Fischer and Jones: they are mirror images. Literary critics and moralists come down hard on Fischer. We know better with Graham. Listen to the resonances between the apparently good and the apparently evil:

- 1) Jones is maimed—he has one hand. Fischer, too, is incomplete. Maybe he lacks heart.
- 2) One man marries Anna, the other Anna-Luise.
- 3) Both wives die. One man grieves; the other may grieve. It is open to question.
- 4) Both men need a confidant, a point of reference. Fischer wants Jones at the next party "as a witness."
- 5) Suicide is a factor in both men's lives.
- 6) Both talk about God.
- 7) Jones humiliates the Toads at the Porridge Party more than Fischer does. His freedom of choice shows them up, and Fischer enjoys it the more because of Jones, and Jones is partially responsible for the conduct of the party. Deane is given the pigskin photograph frame that Jones suggests, and the idea of the checks comes from Jones. Rejected at first, it becomes the final exquisite insult. The Toads are

strangely deferential to Jones. They give him Christmas cards.

8) Neither Jones nor Fischer take second helpings of caviar. Both are observers of the scene, detached.

There is enough to make us realize that we must look shrewdly. Let me say that I do not entirely dislike Fischer. I should find him uncomfortable, but that is different. Jones's indifference proves that attendance at the parties is entirely voluntary—and if the Toads are prepared to be humiliated, they have nothing of which to complain. They are as guilty as, and certainly less interesting than, Fischer. They are a captive audience by their own inclination. They are no more obliged to go on with the humiliation than the reader of this chapter has to make the effort to follow the argument.

Of Fischer, then, we rely on Jones and Anna-Luise for our perspectives. We like Jones because we see the story through his eyes. He claims nothing for himself; he is not ambitious; he is not spiteful; he is capable of love; he has enough self-esteem to stand up to Fischer and he will not compromise his own decent standards. He is a decent Greene-ian hero. He is ordinary "Jones," not even "Mr. Jones."

For these reasons he colors our view of the apparently unassailable Fischer. He detested Fischer, not for his money, but for his pride, for his contempt of the world, his cruelty. Fischer loved no one, not even his daughter: "He didn't even bother to oppose our marriage."¹³

He stands outside ordinary life; he is cold and calculating; he cares for no one; he is a recluse in his great white mansion. He hardly ever comes out; from there he is the puppet-master. Albert looks after him;

¹³ Ibid., 10.

Fischer is ruthless, rude, and impossible to live with. (Greene in self-analysis said similar things about himself to his mistress, Catherine Walston.) Jones predisposes us to loathe Fischer's ritual humiliation of the Toads. Humiliation is Fischer's speciality; his games are imaginative and sophisticated. Kips is made into a Christmas storybook character and sees himself in the bookshop windows. Like a conductor, Fischer has them all under his baton. They perform to his conducting of the *Jupiter Symphony*. Fischer is King of the gods. But he does not—cannot—respond to music. "Music taunted him with his failure to understand."¹⁴ He does not sleep well. He gives no enjoyment in sex: he sees sex as mere "animal impulse." He is humiliated because his wife's lover is so poor. Like everyone in one way or another, he too is maimed.

But watch! Graham, the master of his craft, gives us the earliest possible caveat. Hark to the striking opening sentence.

I think that I used to detest Doctor Fischer more than any other man I have known, just as I loved his daughter more than any other woman.

Of the second half of that sentence there is no qualification. "I loved his daughter more than any other woman." I shall talk about that later, for this is a love story, as tender as anything I know. But consider the first half of the sentence: "I think that I used to detest Doctor Fischer more than any other man I have known." This implies that detestation becomes modified.

As the story progresses, we find the clues. With power comes loneliness. Power

may provide endless opportunities for amusement, but there is no denying the emptiness. The power to bully does not dull his personal honesty, his intellectual precision or his awareness.

Characters whom we view from the outside (like the Toads) we can readily dislike, although, of course, we are cradle-Christians and conditioned to be "nice." Those others whom we struggle to understand—they begin to demand some measure of our sympathy. Any fun, any imagination, any warmth that they show can gain our grudging respect.

"I think that I used to despise Doctor Fischer . . ."

. . . . But I have come to know him better: It is as if Jones says that.

Part-answer to Dr Fischer's terrorism is to understand him and stand up to him. Jones calls Fischer's bluff. Jones has nothing to lose, and so terrorism loses its terror.

We must not label Fischer in the simplistic terms of the critics: bully, misanthrope. W. J. West, generally so perceptive, says that he "corrupts."¹⁵ Not true: he may destroy, but most of those with whom he has dealings are already corruptible if not corrupted. He is a study in power. and power has always, inevitably, limitation.

Greene gives us little handles on this cold, distant man. In the early years of his marriage there was love. Jones—here the authentic voice of Greene—says:

I doubt if one ever ceases to love, but one can cease to be in love as easily as one can outgrow an author one admired as a boy.¹⁶

¹⁴ Ibid., 38.

¹⁵ West, W.J. *The Quest for Graham Greene: A Biography*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1977, 242.

¹⁶ Ibid., 12.

Fischer was young once. Mrs. Montgomery suggests that he has not had a happy childhood, and that 'at bottom he is very sensitive.' He was not always rich or powerful: Dentophil Bouquet had yet to be invented. He once was happy; there was an ordinariness in his sex and in the baffled questions he asked, and he had a child. He had women at his table in the early days of his marriage. He does not like to be reminded of those times, but that is not so very odd.

Success only makes us acutely conscious of where we are not successful. Fischer comes up against different dimensions: music, and Mozart and the *Jupiter Symphony*. Jupiter, the King of the Gods versus Fischer of Geneva, of the Empire of Dentophil. He comes up against a hard place: the stone, against Steiner. His wife resorts to Steiner, and the two of them have a shared interest, music. Fischer is hurt because the clandestine meetings show his inadequacy; they were "A region into which he could not follow."¹⁷

Fischer hates music because he does not understand it. Music is the taunt of his inadequacy. He cannot compete. He is a maimed man. It is a key word and used deliberately. The terrorist who seemed to hold all the cards does not have a full hand. The Duke in *My Last Duchess* feels compromised. "I gave commands, all looks stopped."

None of us likes being made aware of our own limitations. Similarly, Fischer feels humiliated in love. He had been so busy (like Charles Greene, Graham's father) that he had never labored for the tenderness of love. So it is that his wife, Anna,

finds love with Steiner—the Stone. Fischer learns too late and is soured: "A woman who betrayed me with a clerk She preferred his company to mine."¹⁸

"Despising," says Fischer, "comes from great disappointment." He has lost his hopes of finding a spiritual completeness in the world of his creation. His feelings are bleak; his mind is acute.

He speaks scornfully of Pity, and of being pitied: "Pity. My daughter took after her mother in that. Perhaps she married you out of pity, Jones."¹⁹

If that were true and Jones is humiliated in the same way, then Fischer need not feel so isolated. Fischer watches Jones's face and almost reaches out for understanding.

Fischer wants to talk. There are hints of his utter emptiness of life: "Nothing is a bit frightening, Jones."²⁰

At least he can articulate the problem. So he sets up his diversions, and he tests; and he watches. He is almost grateful to find that the independent Jones can be a confidant. "I have no friends,"²¹ he says with a composed arrogance. The Toads are lackeys; they have no independence. They are the free loaders, the gravy train, the addicts of competitions for winning a free holiday, a free car, a free Christmas hamper. He can only despise them—not dislike. He feels drawn towards Jones who has an equality of honesty. Jones is brave enough to call Fischer mad. Fischer respects that and confides in him. He talks about the Toads to him:

"Sometimes I have a desire to talk."²² It is only to Jones that he can talk. "I owe you

¹⁷ Ibid., 39.

¹⁸ Ibid., 105.

¹⁹ Ibid., 115.

²⁰ Ibid., 137.

²¹ Ibid., 102.

²² Ibid., 104.

²³ Ibid., 102.

something, Jones, and I'm not in the habit of running up debts."²³ Fischer needs Jones. In the monopoly of his power there is a terrible fragility. He is, comments the taxi driver, "un peu farfelu"—a bit scatty.

Fischer hesitates as to how to begin conversation with Jones after the death of Anna-Luise. He is also at a loss with Steiner, whom he has ruined. He looks around for help. He finds in Steiner some incomprehensible resource of love. His own incapacity is an irritation, a disease:

"It was a disease I caught when you came into my life, Steiner. I should have told Kips to double your salary and I could have presented Anna with all the Mozart records she wanted. I could have bought you and her, like I bought all the others—except you, Jones."²⁴

Steiner, realizing that this man is also maimed, cannot at the end spit in his face.

Fischer is not complete, yet he has humor, and a detached and philosophical honesty. And he is brave. Of them all, he is the one person who, without fuss or hesitation, can pull the trigger and end it all. In that one act we find Greene's unequivocal admiration. With one bullet in the revolver, Fischer takes us all by surprise.

We have so far deliberately kept God out of the business, but it will not surprise you that Greene does not do so. Dr. Fischer is constantly spoken of in terms of God and Satan. There is little to choose between them: God and the Devil are the same if you

are damned or poor: "To the damned God Almighty looks very like Satan."²⁵

The nature of God is an endlessly fascinating speculation. Graham approaches it in his own way, and the novel is a parable, an extended metaphor. "Theology (is) an amusing intellectual game," says Fischer²⁶. If Fischer is, as it were, God, then Anna-Luise is his only begotten daughter bringing happiness and love to ordinary mankind: Jones. She died in "the white Christmas sweater stained with blood." We are reminded of Christmas and Easter.

But Greene ventures one stage further and holds God/Fischer up for our consideration. Man is made in God's image, and so it is not unreasonable to suppose that Man can repay the compliment. We come at God, who is ineffable, through Fischer who is explicable. The two are spoken of in similar terms.

"Thank God for that," says Anna-Luise. "Thank Dr. Fisher," Jones replied, "or is it the same thing?"²⁷

Again:

'You make him sound like our Father in Heaven,'—says Jones 'his will be done on earth as it is in Heaven.'

'That about describes him,' replies Anna Luise.²⁸

Fischer talks of his gifts to the Toads as being "given," not "earned." They are like God's Grace. And Fischer likes to think that his greed "is a little more like God's." God wants our love, but his creation fails him: "Perhaps he found that he was a rather bad craftsman and he is disappointed in the result."²⁹

²⁴ Ibid., 137.

²⁵ Ibid., 32.

²⁶ Ibid., 61.

²⁷ Ibid., 28.

²⁸ Ibid., 23.

²⁹ Ibid., 61

We can easily see God as a kind of eternal Fischer, who behind his great portico, has become profoundly dissatisfied with objects of creation that have, unaccountably, turned out maimed. Bitterness and cynicism may be all that is left for a god who has suffered huge disappointment, and ends by despising. "God's disappointment is that we have turned out like Kips, Belmont, Deane, Mrs. Montgomery: that Dentophil Bouquet cannot keep up with the manufacture of chocolate, with or without whisky. It cannot account for the fact that we are never satisfied, that we are drunk, cowardly, deformed, and greedy. We cannot altogether blame God that we have given him reasons for disappointment."

Worse for God/Fischer is that he finds a galling, insignificant Steiner who hears his heaven in music and shares it with another. God is disappointed, withdraws into his "Pharaoh's tomb" of a mansion, and finds more pleasure in our humiliation than in our love. The great experiment has failed. We are maimed, and God—while it is true that he retains power—is more aware of the shortcomings of his created enterprise than of its glory. God is maimed in that he cannot resolve his world. It is imperfect. What is left but an ironic delight in exploiting our incompleteness? Who has cancer of the rectum, a streaming cold, incontinence, premature ejaculation? Let us laugh at the one-handed man trying to engage in love. Who dyes her scant hair? Who resorts to drink in order to blur the recognition of cowardice or creeping age?

God would have the teeth white and healthy, but we all, with the bloody-mindedness of humanity, eat chocolate. Somehow God's intentions twist and turn and get away. A boy falls on a ski slope. We see accident and

death: a woman killed because she swerves on the ski slope to avoid that injured boy. The final unsettling joke is that, although Death may provide a respite, a resolution, we are frightened of it. Kips is frightened to pull the cracker. He and the Divisionaire slink out of the experiment with tears of self-disgust.

Only Jones cracks wide the theory of Fischer's disgust. But he does not play fair because he is motivated by the sadness of loss of love. He seeks to end himself in heroic despair. The last three crackers he pulls. The last enemy is not Death, as St. Paul would have us believe; it is Un-Death—not being able to remove ourselves from the nightmare. Jones, with his maimed hand, can open the crackers only with his teeth. He chews at the wrappings desperately, but there is no explosion. For Fischer, Jones is cheating because he wants death: "There is no credit in choosing death if you want to die."³⁰ "My research must go on to its end. I won't give up now,"³¹ says Fischer almost in frustration, but Jones has destroyed Fischer's hypothesis about human littleness of spirit. In all the sadness and unpleasantness, Jones and Anna-Luise stand out with a radiance.

A god of detached cynicism is not distinguishable from the Devil. So runs the equation. Analogies must not be pushed too hard, but they are there, and Greene, we must imagine, enjoys banging them backwards and forwards with Fr. Leopoldo. God and Satan are the two sides of the green baize door. It is Anna-Luise, who has lived with him, who knows her father best. He has become totally disinterested and remote:

"He's hell," said Anna-Luise³²

"You'll let him take you into a high place

³⁰ Ibid., 125.

³¹ Ibid., 59.

³² Ibid., 18.

and show you all the kingdoms of the world,” she taunts. (32)

The thesis is that if you take away love and benevolence then there is nothing to choose between God and Satan. Handy-dandy—it’s the same fellow. In naked power terms, they are both pretty nasty; they are antitheses to mercy, pity, and love. If we considered God without being conditioned by our knowledge of Christianity, then we see him as the retributive God of the Old Testament. He is like some unsympathetic Dr. Fischer using us for research. If we look at the world cynically, then we may regard it like Job. God has become an appalling Dr. Mengele who wants to probe how much we can endure, how far we can be pushed.

Is he God? Is he Satan? As ever it is a matter of perception: Pinkie, the Lieutenant in *The Power and the Glory*, Lord Rochester in *Lord Rochester’s Monkey*. We must contend with both sides of the equation, and understanding brings with it a greater sympathy than we first thought possible.

Let me turn aside for a moment to a character that no one has considered, Albert, the man-servant. I wonder if Greene created him as an indicator, a fogleman.

On his first appearances, Albert is wearing white. He is, however, loathsome: He insults Jones, forgets his name, shuts the door in his face and threatens him with physical violence. But when Jones goes to see Fischer just before the Bomb Party, Albert is wearing black, the color of the Devil, but also the color of mourning and sympathy. In this guise he behaves with impeccable courtesy and calls Jones “Mr.” and “Sir.” The black suit seemed to have changed his character for the better.

The Bomb Party is the ultimate reach of Fischer’s research, but he fails because Jones spoils the cunning plan. Greed may be a factor, but what else motivates us, or gives us hope? Fr. Leopoldo Duran was adamant about Greene’s state of grace because he continued to receive the sacrament. The final efficacy is not power, nor infinite riches, nor Dentophil Bouquet, but a celebration of Love, of sacrifice. Even the Toads turn up to the Christmas service. Jones wonders whether they come to the eternal Birthday of Christ, or to a Toad Party.

If Fischer is like God, then he is like God before the Incarnation and before the first Easter. Here is the moment when he talks to Jones:

“My greed—I told you before—is of a different order. I want . . .” He raised the Christmas cracker rather as the priest at midnight Mass had raised the Host, as though he intended to make a statement of grave importance to a disciple—“this is my body.” He repeated: “I want . . .” and lowered the cracker again.³³

Fischer cannot understand love without the experience of Love. For him there is no ‘salvific incarnation’³⁴ that places God in the material world. On that analogy, God without Christ would, like Fischer, merely act out a history of unsatisfactory diversions. But there are symbols that catch the eye and give hope. The human love of Anna-Luise and Jones is compressed into the symbol of the skiing sweater. White—it was her Christmas present. Red—it is the color of sacrifice. And Anna-Luise was Fischer’s only-begotten child.

³³ Ibid., 107.

³⁴ Bosco, Mark. *Graham Greene’s Catholic Imagination*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2005.

³⁵ Ibid., 139.

At the very end³⁵ Jones remembers:

As I boiled myself an egg for my supper, I heard myself repeating a line which I had heard spoken by a priest at the midnight Mass at Saint Maurice: "As often as you do these things you shall do them in memory of me."

The answer is in memory of the love that is spontaneous, generous, unmaimed.

There is infinite longing in this book. Fischer wants, but does not tell us what. Perhaps he hopes for something better than the greed of the Toads but fears that that may be all. Jones wants "le jour le plus long." Graham Greene wants a Faith more satisfactory than mere hope.

There is one last tack. Greene was very concerned to have the name Fischer, the Swiss spelling. His daughter Caroline checked the Geneva telephone book. Why did Graham want the name? He used "Fisher" before, briefly, in *The Honorary Consul*. The name is significant.

The name "Fisher" is important in the medieval Grail stories, and in 1922, the year Graham went up to Oxford, T.S. Eliot had given it a new prominence with his "Fisher King" in the *The Wasteland*. The Fisher King was the guardian of the Grail, and the Grail was the cup of the Eucharist. Symbols merge: grail, redemption, power. But the Fisher King was old and maimed, and his land, like him, had become impotent and infertile. Maiming is again the subject. For there to be hope in the future, right answers must be given and the old King must die, be replaced; the Grail must be found and handed on. Only then will the land flower.

Greene was growing old. All his life he had placed himself in scenarios of absolute

power and political futility: Indo-China, Haiti, Mexico. In this fable of *Dr. Fischer* he reflects and leaves us with a counterpoint of love—not of youthful love that sings with the heart, but of love that remembers the past with a sad pleasure. The poetry of Keats and the music of Mozart can still be heard; the Grail can be found, and the sacrament held aloft with priestly assurance.

This novel has the most touching, real portrayal of love. Greene means what he writes. In the context of greed, money-making, and power-games, there is a picture that is truthful, unsentimental, recognizable: human love. Never idealized, but surrounded by domesticity—"the cheerful clangour of human washing-up." Jones is confident that we shall recognize it—"it needs no explanation."

We sense from the first page that the love is doomed. The story is tinged with Jones's sadness. Anna-Luise does not want to live without love. She seeks and takes it where it comes, unexpectedly. In spite of her fathering, she is warm-hearted, intelligent, giving: "We took each other for good and all." Their first meeting was so natural—"the waitress . . . assumed we were together . . . And so, quite suddenly, we actually were." They gave themselves to each other on the very first day of their meeting. You are "the only family I want," she said. Jones comes home to the sound of a voice he loves. Their thirty-year difference in age is immaterial, and so is the maimed hand. "I've never been so happy," says Jones. He cannot think of Anna-Luise without tears coming into his eyes. Their love is referred to as a "near miracle." They look forward to "Le jour le plus long." But Anna-Luise's death is mentioned specifically as early as page 15. Their love is doomed.

The day of Anna-Luise's death is recalled with a breath-taking suspension of time. The signs are there: the omens before the

Porridge Party, the talk of buying skis, of avoiding an accident when pregnant. It is heart-rendingly awful. Every trivial detail makes us catch breath with hope. The film is slowed down and love is caught in little moments of still-life.

On that day when Anna-Luise goes off to ski, they act as loving people do:

They sensibly ring the météo to find about conditions.

Jones gives her a good breakfast: Two eggs. He puts chains on the car.

He persuades her to go on an easier red piste.

He does not want her to ski alone. "Safety in numbers. Be careful."

He sits at a window where he can watch her return, and reads *The Knapsack*.

An Accident. A boy with a broken ankle.

But, reassuringly: "She is a good skier."

The Chinese philosopher's 33 *Happy Moments*. Jones adds his 34th happiness.

And then

"... I can remember the gist," says Jones, though not the exact words when I laid the book down for ever."

"In battle when men are hit, they never feel the hurt till later."

A woman—on a stretcher.

A different sweater, red not white.

What we shall do when she is better.

It was not to be. Jones at first, like Fischer, thinks in terms of revenge against the indifference of the powers that govern us, but comes to realize that love, though subject to inevitability and chance, is yet not crushed. "*Vulneratus non victus*"—that cry is on a memorial seat at Berkhamsted School. Desperately, Jones wants God to exist because Anna-Luise can exist somewhere, but only if God exists. There is not one orthodox "believer" in the book, yet Anna-Luise makes God a possibility, and she, so strangely, is the child of Fischer. The memory of love and the chance of "le jour le plus long" keep our poor hopes alive.

This novel never ceases to engage me. It possesses the sharp edge of wit and perception. It is closely textured. It is never sentimental, but it has humor and seriousness. Because Greene does not shun the possibility of the empty awfulness, we know that we can trust him. There is the answer of happiness even if the cup is dashed from our lips.

Strangely, the novel has received little attention. One critic has called it "short, slight and trivial." The first adjective I will concede. Norman Sherry³⁶ mentions it not at all.

I regard it as a bran tub full of goodies with ne'er a bomb to put me off reaching down into the depths again and again, like Jones. Were I to recommend a novel that encapsulated Greene's art and his thinking, I should not hesitate to suggest *Dr. Fischer of Geneva* and his Bomb Party.

36 Sherry, Norman. *The Life of Graham Greene, Volume II: 1939-1955*. New York: Viking, 1994. *The Life of Graham Greene, Volume III: 1955-1991*. New York: Viking, 2004.

David Pearce gained an MA at Oxford University and worked for 33 years at Berkhamsted School where his responsibilities included Head of English Department and also Housemaster. He was a Founding Trustee of the Graham Greene Birthplace Trust and a Festival Director and speaker on a number of occasions. The text of his 2008 paper, 'Stamboul Train and the Timetable for 1932', was later published in *Dangerous Edges of Graham Greene: Journeys with Saints and Sinners* (2011). A keen thespian, David also co-directed a rehearsed reading of Greene's unpublished play *A House of Reputation* which was presented at the Festival in 2000—a world premiere. Yearly, he delighted festival goers with his highly animated, conducted tours of those parts of Berkhamsted School associated with Graham Greene.