

## REVIEW

# “It’s Like Waiting for a Bus”: Two Books about *Our Man in Havana*

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**Creina Mansfield**

Christopher Hull, *Our Man Down in Havana: The Story Behind Graham Greene’s Cold War Spy Novel*. New York: Pegasus Books, 2019.

This is a book that deserves a wide readership. It will be useful both to newcomers to Greene’s work and provides fresh information and insights to those who have long been devotees. Christopher Hull has wisely taken a narrative approach to his material, thereby providing a biography of Greene’s life leading up to his writing of *Our Man in Havana* and setting it in its political context.

He meticulously identifies the threads that became entwined in the novel. From the early formation of the idea of a reluctant spy fabricating a network of agents to details such as the possible origin of the name Wormold, he leads us toward the day actual writing began. By this method the reader appreciates that the creative process began years before Greene wrote the first words.

Why *Our Man Down in Havana*? Is it to imply the seediness that became Greene’s trademark, one half, so to speak of Orwell’s down and out? Certainly, Hull’s chapter on “Havana Vice” is fascinating: he recreates the atmosphere of pre-revolutionary Cuba and gives a convincing account of how Greene came to be barred from entering the United States—commentators often

seem unsure whether Greene brought this about deliberately or not. The book is helpfully divided into sections, chapters, and sub-sections, so a reader intent on looking up a particular subject or time-period will do so easily.

However, a thorough reading from cover to cover is recommended as there are hidden gems throughout. Who knew, for example, that Greene once shared a hotel room with Truman Capote? His description of him as “an extraordinary little fat babyish figure, a fairy to end all fairies, but very endearing and very funny” suggests that he got on better with Capote than with Cuba’s most famous literary resident, Ernest Hemingway who, Hull speculates, resented Greene trespassing on his turf.

Hull gives due weight to Greene’s states of mind and his love affairs without allowing them to become preoccupying. Attention remains on the creative process. By chapter 8 of *Our Man Down in Havana*, we read a detailed description of the making of the film. Though it followed soon after the novel, Cuba had changed. Castro’s revolution transformed the political atmosphere with the new government wanting to convey that the country was no longer the “whorehouse of the Caribbean”; this perhaps contributed to the “interesting failure” of the completed film.

The extraordinary prescience of *Our Man in Havana* is fully explored. How remarkable that, as rumors of rocket installations circulated, the head of the Foreign Office’s American department should annotate a report on the subject with, “Mr Greene was prophetic.” The Cuban Missile Crisis followed.

I began by describing this book as useful. I must emphasize that it is also extremely enjoyable. No one will already know everything that this book holds; no

one should fail to be impressed. One would like to congratulate Dr. Hull, but since his biographical details have a Greene-ish reticence—we are told only that “He lives in England”—he will be difficult to find.

**Creina Mansfield** is an English author and independent scholar, concentrating on the life and works of Graham Greene.