

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Stuart Blackburn, Ph.D.

The Ministry of Fear 1943

Graham Greene

OVERVIEW

The Ministry of Fear is a gripping thriller set in London during the German bombing raids on the city during the Second World War. The story's hero is Arthur Rowe, a middle-aged former journalist who is haunted by his mercy killing of his terminally ill wife. Rowe accidentally gets entangled with a German spy-ring, who manipulate and nearly kill him. He also suffers amnesia from a bomb blast and ends up in an asylum run by the spy-ring, though he is helped by Anna, the sister of the spymaster, and eventually escapes.

LITERARY/HISTORICAL NOTES

The German bombing raids on London between September 1940 and May 1941, collectively called 'The Blitz' (from the German word for 'lightning'), resulted in 28,556 killed, and 25,578 wounded. Greene lived in London at the time, and captures the fear of that period in the novel. He also had indirect experience with a British-style 'ministry of fear' in the form of the Emergency Powers regulations, which detained seemingly innocent victims. His own cousin, Ben Greene, was briefly held at a secret location in London because he (Ben) had been involved in overseeing a plebiscite carried out in the Saar region of Germany as part of the Treaty of Versailles that ended the Great War. The Hollywood-esque ending of this bleak novel, when Rowe walks off with Anna, a German spy-turned-ally, ensured that it would be adapted into a film. Nevertheless, Greene was amazed to learn that the film rights had been bought for the (then) very high sum of £3,000 even before the book was published.

MAIN CHARACTERS

Arthur Rowe	Rowe, the protagonist, is a retired journalist plagued by guilt.
Anna Hilfie	Anna, a member of a spy-ring, befriends Rowe and ends up in love with him.
Willi Hilfie	Willi, her tough brother, is the mastermind of the spy-ring.
Dr Forrester	Forrester is a bogus doctor in charge of an asylum.
Mrs Bellairs	Mrs Bellairs, a fortune-teller, is part of the spy-ring.
Mr Rennit	Rennit is the private detective hired by Rowe.

STORY

Book One: The Unhappy Man

The Fête The story begins with Rowe wandering about war-ravaged London, in Bloomsbury, to be exact, where he visits a local fête (or fair) organised by the 'Mothers of the Free Nations'. He is reminded of the innocence of his rural boyhood and goes up to a booth where people guess the weight of a large cake; the estimates are written down and the most accurate wins the cake. Rowe throws out a random answer of three pounds five ounces and walks away.

Fortune-teller Next, he goes into a fortune-teller's tent, where a bejewelled lady gives an accurate account of his past. But Rowe snaps, 'Not the past; tell me about the future.' Immediately, 'as if he had pressed a button,' the mood changes, the fortune-teller lowers her voice and says, 'You must say that the cake is four pounds eight and a half ounces.' Rowe asks if that is the correct weight and is told that 'it is immaterial.'

Cake As instructed, he returns to the cake weighing lottery and pays for another estimate, this time guessing the weight mentioned by the fortune-teller. Although this is obviously much too high, he is given the cake. Rowe is further bemused when a lady explains that 'there has been a mistake' and that another person guessed the correct weight. But Rowe does not surrender his prize.

Bomb blast Rowe returns to his rooming house, which has been half-destroyed by German bombs. The next day, a new lodger appears, a man with twisted shoulders, and takes tea with Rowe. When the stranger attempts to poison him, Rowe recognises the taste as being the same substance that he used (many years earlier) to put his terminally ill wife out of her misery. The man attacks Rowe, but their struggle is cut short by another bombing raid. The blast renders Rowe semi-unconscious and the atmosphere turns nightmarish. When he awakes, the mysterious cake has vanished.

Investigations Rowe seeks help from a private detective agency, where, in the midst of a rambling, bizarre conversation, Rowe explains that he is considered a 'murderer' for his mercy killing. Rowe also undertakes his own investigation and goes to office of the Mothers of Free Nations, the charity that ran the fête. There, he meets Willi and Anna, brother and sister, who are Austrian refugees.

Séance When Willi and Rowe track down the house of the fortune-teller from the fête, they are invited to take part in a séance. In the dark, one of the participants is murdered with Rowe's pocket-knife. Convinced now that people are trying to get rid of him, Rowe escapes before the police arrive.

Fugitive Rowe is now a fugitive from justice. He hides in an air raid shelter, where the atmosphere of fear and disorientation mirrors the increasingly psychotic condition of Rowe's mind. His paranoia is increased when he discovers that the detective he has hired has disappeared without explanation. Finally, unable to borrow money from a friend, he contemplates suicide.

Books The next surreal episode involves a heavy load of books. Wandering around London, with suicidal thoughts, Rowe meets an old bookseller who is struggling to carry a suitcase of books. Wanting to do a good deed, for once, Rowe agrees to take the books to a Mr Travers in room 6 of a hotel. When he enters, though, he finds Anna and the suitcase explodes.

Book Two: The Happy Man

Rowe wakes up in a sanatorium in the countryside, where he is being treated for severe amnesia and where the nurses call him 'Mr Richard Digby.' Rowe feels happy because he is finally free of his memory of having killed his wife. Anna visits and, confusingly, refers to him as 'Arthur.' During her visits, Rowe begins to imagine that he was once in love with Anna and is in love with her now. He starts to recover and announces that he is leaving, but the doctors threaten him with permanent confinement in the 'sick bay.' Curious, Rowe visits this part of the hospital, which he finds is a lunatic asylum, with patients tightly laced into straightjackets. The doctors become angry with Rowe's increasing independence and remind him that the police are looking for him in connection with the murder at the séance. That reminder triggers his memories of killing his wife.

Book Three: Bits and Pieces

Escape With the help of a sympathetic nurse, Rowe does escape and takes a train to London, where he goes to the police to confess to the murder (which he didn't commit, but he is too confused to remember what actually happened at the séance). The police inform him that the stabbed man didn't die and that it was staged in order to prevent him (Rowe) from going to the police in the first place.

Microfilm The police also tell Rowe that the mysterious cake held a microfilm with instructions for a Nazi spy-ring. Then, they take Rowe to a tailor's shop in order for him to identify the man who faked his death at the séance and is one of the spies. Before they can arrest him, however, the man makes a phone call and kills himself.

Part Four: The Whole Man

Rowe works out the telephone number called by the dead spy and dials it himself. Anna answers and he hangs up without speaking. When he goes to her flat, it is revealed that Willi is the mastermind of the spy-ring. Willi runs away, but Rowe catches up with him at Paddington Station just as another air raid starts. Willi hands over the controversial microfilm and then, cruelly, reminds Rowe of his mercy killing before committing suicide. Rowe returns to Anna, who is part of the spy-ring but does not approve of her brother's methods. She wants Rowe to be happy, without his memories. The novel ends with them pledging their love to one another.

THEMES

Fear The overriding theme of the novel, indicated by its title, is the power of fear. What makes the story so gripping, though, is that Greene depicts several interlocking types of fear. First, there is the sheer terror of war, more specifically of the London Blitz, that is, the German air raids that terrify Rowe and other residents of the capital. The novel is filled with descriptions of a ravaged city, of buildings flattened by bombs and of streets strewn with debris. Citizens huddle in underground stations, where the reverberations of the bombs drive some people almost to insanity. Greene gives us this description: '[T]here was a war on – you could tell that from the untidy gaps between the Bloomsbury houses – a flat fireplace half-way up a wall, like the painted fireplace in a cheap dolls' house, and lots of mirrors and green wall-papers, and from round a corner of the sunny afternoon the sound of glass being swept up like the lazy noise of the sea on a shingled beach.'

Beyond the material remains of war, though, it is the interior dimension of fear that the novel develops so brilliantly. Rowe is more afraid of his murderous past than of his dangerous present. This is the second kind of fear, a loathing of what he has done: Rowe poisoned his wife to relieve her pain from a terminal illness, and now he must live with that guilt. Paradoxically, he is only freed from that guilt-filled past when he loses his memory as the result of a bomb blast. Now, he is the 'happy man' of Part Two.

And, yet, there is a third kind of fear that continues to dog him to the very end. This is the 'ministry of fear,' a secret (German) organisation embedded in English society and dedicated to undermining Britain's war effort by frightening its population. One of the characters (known only as Johns) says, 'The Germans are wonderfully thorough [...] Card-indexed all the so-called leaders, Socialites, diplomats, politicians, labour leaders, priests – and then presented the ultimatum. Everything forgiven and forgotten, or the Public Prosecutor. It wouldn't surprise me if they'd done the same thing over here [in London]. They formed, you know, a kind of Ministry of Fear – with the most efficient under-secretaries. It isn't only that they get a hold on certain people. It's the general atmosphere they spread, so you can't depend on a soul.' At one point, Greene comments that Rowe himself feels 'directed, controlled, moulded, by some agency with a surrealist imagination'. Bombed from above, haunted from within and manipulated from the outside, Rowe is a terrified man in a city pervaded by fear.

Surrealism Although Greene is not a surrealist writer, and although the surrealist movement had faded by the 1940s, *The Ministry of Fear* displays the psychic elements of surrealism as vividly as a André Breton novel or a Juan Miro painting. The bombs that flatten buildings also appear to knock down the partitions inside Rowe's mind, disorienting him so that he (and the reader) have difficulty separating inside from out, past from present, image from reality. These dream-like states that inspired surrealist artists play a prominent role in Greene's novel. One chapter begins with this statement: 'There are dreams which belong only partly to the unconscious; these are the dreams we remember on waking so vividly that we deliberately continue them, and so fall asleep again and wake and sleep and the dream goes on without interruption, with a thread of logic that the pure dream doesn't possess.' Rowe often dreams about his past, where he confesses to his mother, talks to the Vicar and plays with other children. Waking from his amnesia, he thinks that Anna is his wife or lover, which is partly true and partly false. Indeed, the entire novel depicts a phantasmagoria, where predictability is fragile and mystery is normalised, where the real and the surreal merge, and where randomness rules. It might be described as a nightmare. Certainly, it is no coincidence that surrealism, which grew out of the horrors and confusion of the Great War, was reflected in Greene's novel of the Second World War.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Rowe Arthur Rowe is a middle-aged man who poisoned his wife in order to end her suffering and suffers from guilt for the rest of his life. He also suffers from a predilection for pity, which can take on monstrous dimensions. From the very beginning, he is subject to hallucinations and various other states of mental instability. He is a kind and sensitive man, a victim of his own mistakes and of the times in which he lived.

Nostalgic Given the shattered state of Rowe's mind, it is no surprise that he frequently lives in the past. We discover this in the opening paragraph of the novel, when he wanders into a fête in war-ravaged London. 'There was something about a fête which drew Arthur Rowe irresistibly, bound him a helpless victim...he looked wistfully over the railings...the fête called him like innocence: it was entangled in childhood, the vicarage gardens and the girls in white summer frocks and the smell of herbaceous borders and security.' So far, so normal. Many people indulge in reminiscences of an imagined garden of a childhood Eden. But we should notice that Greene uses the word 'victim' here and that the word 'fête' is a homophone of 'fate.' These are hints of a darker past. A few pages later, we read that Rowe was 'filled with horror at the thought of what a child becomes, and what the dead must feel watching the change from innocence to guilt and powerless to stop it.'

Haunted The truth is that Rowe is haunted by his past, not the time of his youth but of his marriage, because he took the decision to kill his wife in order to spare her the continued suffering of her terminal illness. This terrible guilt pursues him throughout the novel, as relentlessly as the bombs and the spies who want to kill him. One particularly vivid revelation of his haunted condition occurs when Rowe is talking to the private detective whom he has hired. Rowe has just escaped from the police after a man was killed during a séance in which he participated. He says to the detective, 'I didn't do it. You must believe me. I don't make a habit of murder [he has already told the detective that he killed his wife].' Greene explains: 'He always bit on the word "murder" as you bite a sore spot on the tongue: he never used the word without self-accusation. The law had taken a merciful view; he himself took the merciless one. Perhaps if they had hanged him, he would have found excuses for himself between the trap-door and the bottom of the drop, but they had given him a lifetime to analyse his motives.' Although acquitted by a jury of the charge of homicide, Rowe must live with a longer, self-imposed guilty verdict.

Pitying Rowe is also assailed by a 'dangerous' sense of pity. This curious but convincing view of pity stems, of course, from the fact that Rowe killed his wife, and ruined his own life, because he pitied her suffering. That event is never directly described, but there are other moments when Rowe feels pity. One of the most explicit occurs when he and the police go to the mental asylum where Rowe was held after he suffered amnesia and from where he later escaped. Inside, Rowe sees that the 'ministry of fear' people have killed several patients in order to prevent them from divulging information to the police. Looking at the massacre, Rowe 'felt the awful stirring of pity that told him something had got to be done, that you couldn't let things stay as they were, with the innocent struggling in fear for breath and dying pointlessly. He said slowly, "I'd like...how I'd like..." and felt cruelty waking beside pity, its old and tired companion.' Pity is generally considered a humane reaction to suffering, but in the character of Rowe, we can see that it has a dangerous side, as well.

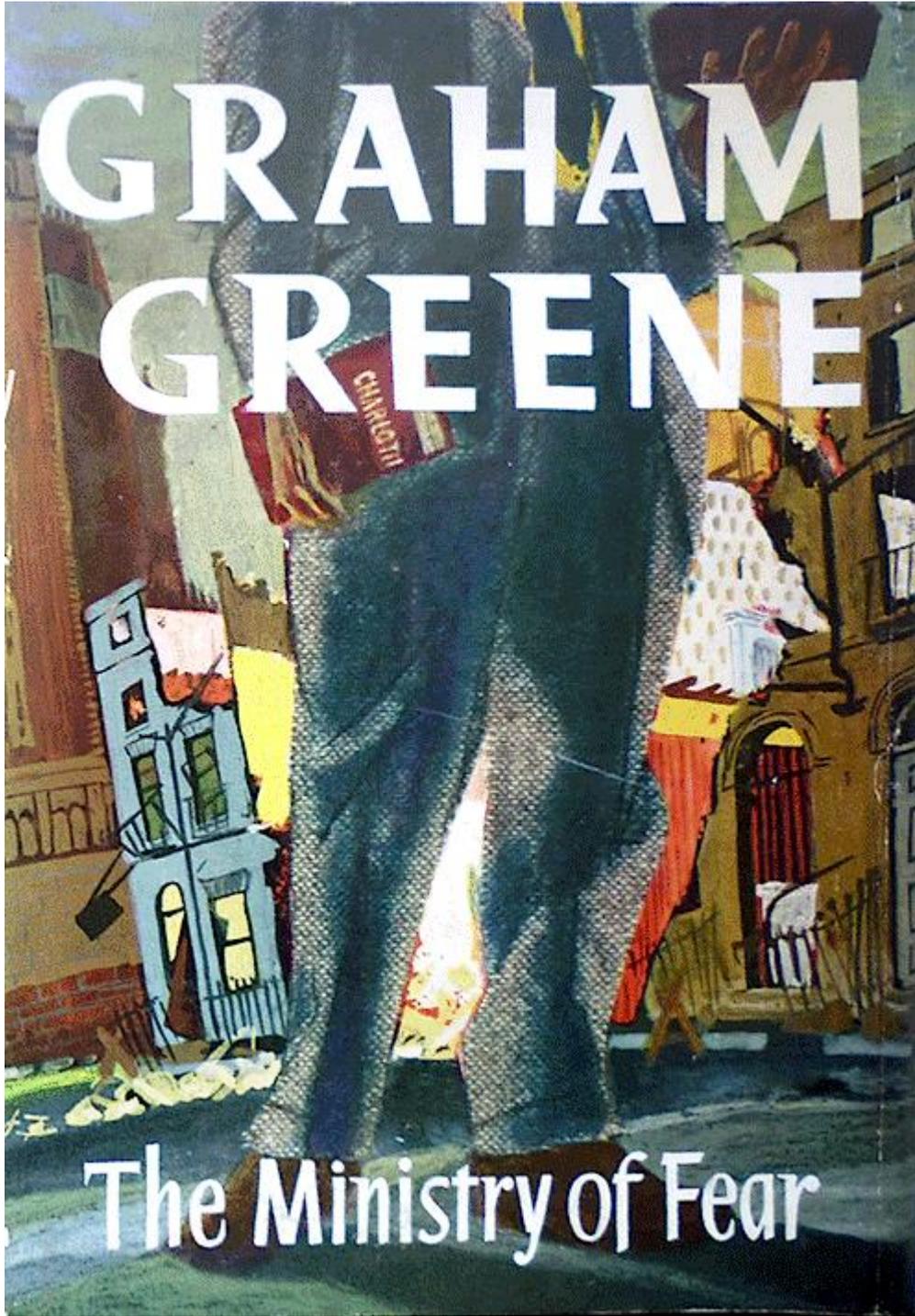
Anna Anna is a spy, and therefore deceptive, but she also has scruples, which prevent her from condoning the actions that her brother, Willi, uses to destroy the enemy, including Rowe. She is clever and beautiful and ends up becoming attracted to Rowe and falling in love with him.

Deceitful Anna is part of the spy-ring led by her brother, Willi. As such, she is practised in the arts of deception, which she skilfully displays during her first appearance. Rowe, suspicious about the cake and other incidents, goes to the offices of the Mothers of Free Nations. There, he meets Willi and Anna, who present themselves as refugees running a charity to support 'peace.' In fact, they are part of the 'ministry of fear', which has no scruples about murdering or otherwise doing away with Rowe or anyone else who stands in the way of its clandestine work. When Rowe says that he suspects foul play about the mysterious cake, Anna simply dismisses his fears as unfounded. Every time he raises another point, she finds a way to deflect it or explain it away. 'How do you know,' she asks, 'that it isn't just theft, drugs, things like that?' Greene comments: 'She was looking at him with what she pretended was sympathy, but that was impossible.'

Sympathetic A few chapters later, however, Anna does become sympathetic to Rowe's plight. After her brother sets Rowe up to take the rap for a murder (at the séance), Rowe is on the run, penniless and friendless. When he calls Anna and Willi's office, she answers the phone and is shocked to learn what her brother has done. Listening to him describe his perilous situation, she says gently, 'You are so helpless.' She then offers him valuable advice, telling him to avoid going to his bank and seeing anyone whom he thinks might be a friend. Anna, we learn, is part of the spy network, but she also has a conscience, especially when she finds an attractive man in need of help.

Loving Anna's sympathy evolves into a deeper emotional bond with Rowe as the novel progresses. This becomes clear when Anna visits Rowe in the mental asylum, where he has been taken after a bomb blast wipes out his memory. It is a tender scene. He believes that she is a woman whom he loved and still loves now. 'I must have loved you,' he says, 'because directly you came the other day, I felt relieved.' When he voices doubts that she loves him—'I'm so much older'—she reassures him that she does. She tells him that she loves him because she realises that he cares about other people, which is something that 'they don't do back home in Germany.' Rowe wants to leave the hospital, but Anna isn't sure. She wants him to be happy, to rest, until his memory comes back. She uses words like 'dear heart' and 'my dear' and places her lips on his in 'an adolescent kiss.'

Protective Loving Anna turns into Rowe's protector in the final dramatic scenes of the novel. Although Willi has been revealed as the mastermind of the spy organisation, he still has the valuable microfilm that had been concealed in the cake. Rowe goes to their flat to have it out with him and finds Anna is there, too. Anna is caught in a dilemma: she loves both Rowe and her brother and doesn't want either to be hurt. But in the end, she chooses to protect Rowe. She reveals her brother's hiding place in the flat and leads Rowe there. Then she negotiates with her brother and convinces him to hand over the microfilm in return for Rowe letting him escape. When it turns out that the microfilm Willi gives Anna is not the all-important negative but only a copy, Rowe decides that he must hunt Willi down. Now, Anna must choose again. And again, she decides to help Rowe by telling him where Willi has gone. Anna has undergone a journey from deceptive spy to sympathetic friend to loving companion.



GRAHAM GREENE

The Ministry of Fear