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## World Literature

Frederick Forsyth

BORN: 1938, Ashford, Kent, England

NATIONALITY: British

GENRE: Fiction

MAJOR WORKS:

The Day of the Jackal (1971)

The Odessa File (1972)

The Dogs of War (1974)

## Overview

Frederick Forsyth is one of the world's leading writers of suspenseful thrillers. Since the 1971 publication of *The Day of the Jackal*, he has written a string of best-selling novels featuring realistic international crises. Forsyth's ability to depict the operations of large organizations and his insider's descriptions of military and governmental operations have been especially noted by critics.

## Works in Biographical and Historical Context

*The Youngest Fighter Pilot Turns to Journalism* Forsyth was born in Ashford, Kent, England, in 1938 and educated at Tonbridge School, where he studied French and German. He joined the Royal Air Force in 1956 and served as its youngest fighter pilot (at age nineteen) before entering a career in journalism. From 1958 to 1961, he was a reporter for the *Eastern Daily Press*, first in Norwich and later in King's Lynn, Norfolk; in 1961 he was a Reuters correspondent and traveled between London, Paris, and East Berlin, serving as bureau chief in the East German capital because of his knowledge of languages. Next he served as a BBC radio reporter in London between 1965 and 1967, an assistant diplomatic correspondent for BBC Television in 1967, and a freelance journalist in Nigeria in 1967 and 1968 after his pro-Biafran coverage offended Sir David Hunt, British high commissioner in Lagos.

*From Journalist to Award-Winning Novelist* Forsyth's coverage of the Biafran war led to his one major work of nonfiction, *The Biafra Story* (1969; revised as *The Making of an African Legend: The Biafra Story*, 1977). The Biafran war was a civil war in Nigeria (1967-1970), fought as the oil-rich region of Biafra sought to secede from a Nigeria dominated by an oppressive government that in some ways resembled the British colonial administration from which Nigeria had gained its independence. Shortly thereafter, drawing heavily on his experience in journalism, Forsyth published *The Day of the Jackal*, his first novel. For this work he received the Mystery Writers of America Edgar Allan Poe Award (1971) for Best Novel. Forsyth told J. Bonfante in 1971 that he had no literary ambitions but to be merely a commercial writer whose intent was to sell copies and make money. He claims that *The Day of the Jackal* was born of his need "to ease a financially embarrassed position."

Forsyth's novels are usually set in the cities and countries where he worked as a news correspondent. *The Day of the Jackal*, for example, takes place in several western European countries and comes to a climax in Paris. *The Odessa File* is based on Forsyth's time in East Berlin, where he first became aware of the existence of an underground Nazi organization that protected war criminals from prosecution. *The Dogs of War* concerns a fictional African country in the throes of revolution and is based on his experiences in Biafra. From Nazi war criminals to Biafran "freedom fighters" to international terrorist organizations, Forsyth has consistently covered key world events in his fiction, offering readers their own fear back to them, packaged as fiction and neatly resolved in the end.

## LITERARY AND HISTORICAL CONTEMPORARIES

Forsyth's famous contemporaries include:

Robert Ludlum (1927-2001): American author of more than two dozen bestselling thrillers, include the popular Bourne series.

Helmut Kohl (1930-): German politician and chancellor of Germany from 1990 to 1998 (and of West Germany from 1982 to 1990).

Tom Clancy (1947-): American author of best-selling political thrillers such as *The Hunt for Red October*.

Rajiv Gandhi (1944-1991): Seventh prime minister of India, assassinated by a suicide bomber during his 1991 campaign.

## COMMON HUMAN EXPERIENCE

Foremost among Forsyth's themes is an individual's relationship to the organization. Forsyth suggests that it is the lone professional, whether opposed to the organization or part of it, who truly creates history, but it is a history represented only palely on the front pages of newspapers. Other suspense thrillers that explore this theme include:

*The Hunt for Red October* (1984), a novel by Tom Clancy. This techno-thriller follows the adventures of Jack Ryan, an ex-marine working part-time for the CIA.

*Seven Days in May* (1962), a novel by Fletcher Knebel. In this political thriller, U.S. president Jordan Lyman learns of a military plot to overthrow him because of dissatisfaction with a treaty he signed with the Soviet Union.

*The Manchurian Candidate* (1959), a novel by Richard Condon. This novel, banned in some communist states, follows a brainwashed son of a political family who has become an assassin for the Communist Party against his will.

The Bourne Identity (1980), a spy thriller by Robert Ludlum. In this gripping tale, a man with retrograde amnesia attempts to discover who he is and why several organizations, including the CIA, want to kill him.

### *Works in Literary Context*

*The Documentary Thriller.* Realism is the key word behind the novels of Frederick Forsyth. Often credited as the originator of a new genre, the "documentary thriller," Forsyth found sudden fame with the publication of his smash-hit best seller, *The Day of the Jackal*, a book that combines the suspense of an espionage novel with the detailed realism of the documentary novel, a genre first made popular by Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood*. The detail in Forsyth's novels depends not only on the months of research he spends on each book but also on his own varied personal experiences, which lend even greater authenticity to his writing. As Dictionary of Literary Biography contributor Andrew F. Macdonald explains, "the sense of immediacy, on an insider's view of world affairs, of all-too-human world figures," as well as quick-paced plots, are the keys to the author's popularity.

*Political Thrills on the Grandest Scale.* Building on the tradition of crime fiction, Forsyth's first novels were published in the 1970s, alongside the last novels by Agatha Christie, a forerunner in what is often referred to as the Golden Age of Detective Fiction. However, unlike Christie's comparatively lighthearted tales of detective fiction, many of which were written before World War II, the events of popular political thrillers like Richard Condon's *The Manchurian Candidate* (1959), Fletcher Knebel's *Seven Days in May* (1962), and Forsyth's *The Day of the Jackal* take place on a much larger scale. Reflecting the continued decline in trust in authority, particularly that of one's government, the plots of these novels are structured by conflicts that accompanied the rapid social change following World War II.

*How Machines and Organizations Operate.* Forsyth is among the best of contemporary writers at capturing the heart and soul of organizations at work. While most crime novels pay necessary attention to police procedure and the motivation of chief and underling, few writers risk the minute concern with organizational dynamics and the massive amount of detail that truly represent the way organizations do, in fact, operate. It is surely no exaggeration to say that organizations largely create the texture of modern life; yet few novels, crime-oriented or otherwise, shed much realistic light on their operation. This is Forsyth's forte, with the added bonus of precise technical description worthy of a science writer, of how things work, ranging from the construction of a special rifle (*The Day of the Jackal*, 1971) and improvised car bombs (*The Odessa File*, 1972), to gunrunning (*The Dogs of War*, 1974) and the innards of oil tankers (*The Devil's Alternative*, 1979), to the assembly of miniature nuclear bombs (*The Fourth Protocol*, 1984).

*Journalistic Style.* Forsyth's direct, precise writing style is attributable to his early career as a newspaper journalist. The effect of detail invites the reader into the world of the expert, establishing credibility and making the layperson a partner and an insider. Forsyth's disciplined style is more than simple restraint, the resisting of the tempting melodramatic adjective or adverb. Rather, it constitutes a point of view, a "transparency" of style that allows the reader a view of plot and character seemingly untrammelled by authorial guidance.

### *Works in Critical Context*

Winner of an Edgar Allan Poe Award for *The Day of the Jackal*, Forsyth has been praised for his highly detailed depictions of the inner workings of governmental and military organizations. His ability to present a behind-the-scenes perspective while spinning a complicated plot of international dimensions allows his readers to believe in the story and become willing accomplices in its development.

*The Day of the Jackal* *The Day of the Jackal*, based on actual attempts to assassinate French president Charles de Gaulle, was written in thirty-five days. It won immediate acclaim and sold 6 million copies in three years. Stanley Elkin, writing for the *New York Times Book Review*, found Forsyth's "implausible villain, a professional assassin whose business card might well read 'Presidents and Premiers My Specialty,'" not only plausible but so professional "that even saintly readers will be hard put not to cheer this particular villain along his devious way." Deservedly Forsyth's best-known book, *The Day of the Jackal* is both a treatise on police procedure and a testimony to the power of a determined individual. *The Day of the Jackal* has been translated into eleven languages. A successful film was made by Universal Pictures in 1973, with Fred Zinnemann directing and Edward Fox playing the Jackal.

*The Day of the Jackal* established a highly successful formula, one repeated by Forsyth and a host of other writers. Critics have praised its powerful effect (adjectives like "riveting" and "gripping" are common), albeit with some qualms about his language. Elkin, for example, talks about his "graceless prose style which shapes up as a lot of recitatif [a recitation blending song and speech] and very little aria [melody]." Forsyth's novels ever since have been criticized for what they do not accomplish more than for what they actually attempt, though he himself refuses to rank his work as belles-lettres. Perhaps unfortunately, with each subsequent book, commentators have complained about elements of the formula as faults rather than as essential parts of Forsyth's approach. Michael Crichton, writing for *Saturday Review*, found that the subject matter of *The Odessa File* had "too many reverberations, too many profound moral questions, to fit comfortably in a suspense-novel format." He added that the "use of real background in this instance often seems exploitative in a disagreeable way."

*Sentiment for Fair Play and the Little Guy in the Short Stories* According to some critics, Forsyth's short stories reveal a gentler and more "literary" sensibility than the hard-driving, masculine persona of the longer novels. However allegedly financial were Forsyth's motives for writing his more successful works, his short stories show a determined sympathy for the vulnerable little man and an almost nostalgic championing of traditional fair play. In spite of their abbreviated length, the stories for the most part

showcase fully rounded characters in relatively realistic situations, facing problems that are often quite modest and ordinary. The stories thus offer a more domestic and limited perspective on the themes that inform the longer novels. One story, "There Are No Snakes in Ireland," won Forsyth a second Edgar Allan Poe Award.

### *Responses to Literature*

1. Discuss the use of realism in *The Day of the Jackal*. Which elements would you consider the most realistic? Which seem like the most far-fetched?
2. Explain how his experience as a war reporter influenced Forsyth's choice of subject matter in his book-length works. Provide examples to support your views.
3. How do you account for the divided critical response to Forsyth's fiction?
4. Keep a reading journal while you read *The Day of the Jackal*. At the end of each chapter, write a short paragraph predicting future events in the plot. After you finish the book, go back and analyze your predictions. If they were correct, what clues did Forsyth provide to help you anticipate the coming events? If not, how did he lead you astray?

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“World literature” is a term usually used to refer to all literature written in whatever language you don’t speak. So, I live in Ireland, where the lingua franca is English. American, English, Irish, Australian, Canadian, etc. books are considered “literature” ‘cause their written in English. It doesn’t matter where the author lives. It could be Rushdie, Roth, Updike, Gaiman, Tolkien, whoever, as long as they’re writing in English. Works written in any other language (even translated) are “world literature”.

World literature is sometimes used to refer to the sum total of the world's national literatures, but usually it refers to the circulation of works into the wider world beyond their country of origin. Often used in the past primarily for masterpieces of Western European literature, world literature today is increasingly seen in global context. Readers today have access to an unprecedented range of works from around the world in excellent translations, and since the mid-1990s a lively debate has grown World Literature Today. 455K likes. Your Passport to Great Reading.Â The visiting writers include Russian-born literary nonfiction writer Anna Badkhen; Kapka Kassabova, a native of Bulgaria and a writer of journeys and geographies; Philippine American poet Joseph O. Legaspi; poet, translator and essayist Philip Metres; Dunya Mikhail, an Iraqi American poet and essayist; poet and translator Andr  Naffis-Sahely; Vi Khi Nao, whose work includes poetry, fiction and film; Felipe Restrepo Pombo World literature includes works of literature from any country with a written language. It also includes publications of ancient texts from cultures as diverse as those of the Aztecs and Sumerians. Comparative literature scholarship involves the study of the literature of at least two distinct linguistic cultural or national groups. Most comparative literature scholars, sometime called comparatists, are fluent in several languages.