

London Rules (Slough House)

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Ian Fleming. John le Carr. Len Deighton. Mick Herron. The brilliant plotting of Herron's twice CWA Dagger Award-winning Slough House series of spy novels is matched only by his storytelling gift and an ear for viciously funny political satire.

"Mick Herron is the John le Carr of our generation." -Val McDermid

At MI5 headquarters Regent's Park, First Desk Claude Whelan is learning this the hard way. Tasked with protecting a beleaguered prime minister, he's facing attack from all directions: from the showboating MP who orchestrated the Brexit vote, and now has his sights set on Number Ten; from the showboat's wife, a tabloid columnist, who's crucifying Whelan in print; from the PM's favorite Muslim, who's about to be elected mayor of the West Midlands, despite the dark secret he's hiding; and especially from his own deputy, Lady Di Taverner, who's alert for Claude's every stumble. Meanwhile, the country's being rocked by an apparently random string of terror attacks.

Over at Slough House, the MI5 satellite office for outcast and demoted spies, the agents are struggling with personal problems: repressed grief, various addictions, retail paralysis, and the nagging suspicion that their newest colleague is a psychopath. Plus someone is trying to kill Roddy Ho. But collectively, they're about to rediscover their greatest strength—that of making a bad situation much, much worse.

It's a good thing Jackson Lamb knows the rules. Because those things aren't going to break themselves.

Mick Herron is a British novelist and short-story writer who was born in Newcastle and studied English at Oxford. He is the author of six books in the Slough House series (Slow Horses, Dead Lions, Real Tigers, Spook Street, London Rules, and the novella The List) and four Oxford mysteries (Down Cemetery Road, The Last Voice You Hear, Why We Die, and Smoke and Whispers), as well as the standalone novels Reconstruction, Nobody Walks, and This Is What Happened. His work has won the CWA Gold Dagger for Best Crime Novel, the Steel Dagger for Best Thriller, and the Ellery Queen Readers Award, and been nominated for the Macavity, Barry, Shamus, and Theakstons Novel of the Year Awards. He currently lives in Oxford and writes full-time. The killers arrived in a sand-coloured jeep, and made short work of the village.

There were five of them and they wore mismatched military gear, two opting for black and the others for piebald variations. Neckerchiefs covered the lower half of their faces, sunglasses the upper, and their feet were encased in heavy boots, as if they'd crossed the surrounding hills the hard way. From their belts hung sundry items of battleground kit. As the first emerged from the vehicle he tossed a water bottle onto the seat behind him, an action replicated in miniature in his aviator lenses.

It was approaching noon, and the sun was as white as the locals had known it. Somewhere nearby, water tumbled over stones. The last time trouble had called here, it had come bearing swords.

Out of the car, by the side of the road, the men stretched and spat. They didn't talk. They seemed in no hurry, but at the same time were focused on what they were doing. This was part of the operation: arrive, limber up, regain flexibility. They had driven a long way in the heat. No sense starting before they were in tune with their limbs and could trust

their reflexes. It didn't matter that they were attracting attention, because nobody watching could alter what was to happen. Forewarned would not mean forearmed. All the villagers had were sticks.

One of these—an ancient thing bearing many of the characteristics of its parent tree, being knobbed and imprecise, sturdy and reliable—was leaned on by an elderly man whose weathered looks declared him farming stock. But somewhere in his history, perhaps, lurked a memory of war, for of all those watching the visitors perform their callisthenics he alone seemed to understand their intent, and into his eyes, already a little tearful from the sunshine, came both fear and a kind of resignation, as if he had always known that this, or something like it, would rear up and swallow him. Not far away, two women broke off from conversation. One held a cloth bag. The other's hands moved slowly towards her mouth. A barefoot boy wandered through a doorway into sunlight, his features crumpling in the glare.

In the near distance a chain rattled as a dog tested its limits. Inside a makeshift coop, its mesh and wooden struts a patchwork of recycled materials, a chicken squatted to lay an egg no one would ever collect.

From the back of their jeep the men fetched weapons, sleek and black and awful.

The last ordinary noise was the one the old man made when he dropped his stick. As he did so his lips moved, but no sound emerged.

And then it began.

From afar, it might have been fireworks. In the surrounding hills birds took to the air in a frightened rattle, while in the village itself cats and dogs leaped for cover. Some bullets went wild, sprayed in indiscriminate loops and skirls, as if in imitation of a local dance; the chicken coop was blasted to splinters, and scars were chipped into stones that had stood unblemished for centuries. But others found their mark. The old man followed his stick to the ground, and the two women were hurled in opposite directions, thrown apart by nodules of lead that weighed less than their fingers. The barefoot boy tried to run. In the hillsides were tunnels carved into rock, and given time he might have found his way there, waited in the darkness until the killers had gone, but this possibility was blasted out of existence by a bullet that caught him in the neck, sending him cartwheeling down the short slope to the river, which was little more than a trickle today. The villagers caught in the open were scattering now, running into the fields, seeking shelter behind walls and in ditches; even those who hadn't seen what was happening had caught the fear, for catastrophe is its own herald, trumpeting its arrival to early birds and stragglers alike. It has a certain smell, a certain pitch. It sends mothers shrieking for their young, the old looking for God.

And two minutes later it was over, and the killers left. The jeep, which had idled throughout the brief carnage, spat stones as it accelerated away, and for a short while there was stillness. The sound of the departing engine folded into the landscape and was lost. A buzzard mewed overhead. Closer to home a gurgle sounded in a ruined throat, as someone struggled with a new language, whose first words were their last. And behind that, and then above it, and soon all around it, grew the screams of the survivors, for whom all familiar life was over, just as it was for the dead.

Within hours trucks would come bearing more men with guns, this time trained

outwards, on the surrounding hillsides. Helicopters would land, disgorging doctors and military personnel, and others would fly overhead, crisscrossing the sky in orchestrated rage, while TV cameras pointed and blamed. On the streets shrouds would cover the fallen, and newly loosed chickens would wander by the river, pecking in the dirt. A bell would ring, or at least, people would remember it ringing. It might have been in their minds. But what was certain was that there would still be, above the buzzing helicopters, a sky whose blue remained somehow unbroken, and a distant buzzard mewing, and long shadows cast by the stunned Derbyshire hills.

PART ONE COOL CATS

In some parts of the world dawn arrives with rosy fingers, to smoothe away the creases left by night. But on Aldersgate Street, in the London borough of Finsbury, it comes wearing safecracker's gloves, so as not to leave prints on windowsills and doorknobs; it squints through keyholes, sizes up locks and generally cases the joint ahead of approaching day. Dawn specialises in unswept corners and undusted surfaces, in the nooks and chambers day rarely sees, because day is all business appointments and things being in the right place, while its younger sister's role is to creep about in the breaking gloom, never sure of what it might find there. It's one thing casting light on a subject. It's another expecting it to shine.

So when dawn reaches Slough House—a scruffy building whose ground floor is divided between an ailing Chinese restaurant and a desperate newsagent's, and whose front door, made filthy by time and weather, never opens—it enters by the burglar's route, via the rooftops opposite, and its first port of call is Jackson Lamb's office, this being on the uppermost storey. Here it finds its only working rival a standard lamp atop a pile of telephone directories, which have so long served this purpose they have moulded together, their damp covers bonding in involuntary alliance. The room is cramped and furtive, like a kennel, and its overpowering theme is neglect. Psychopaths are said to decorate their walls with crazy writing, the loops and whorls of their infinite equations an attempt at cracking the code their life is hostage to. Lamb prefers his walls to do their own talking, and they have cooperated to the extent that the cracks in their plasterwork, their mildew stains, have here and there conspired to produce something that might amount to an actual script—a scrawled observation, perhaps—but all too quickly any sense these marks contain blurs and fades, as if they were something a moving finger had writ before deciding, contrary to the wisdom of ages, to rub out again.

Lamb's is not a room to linger in, and dawn, anyway, never tarries long. In the office opposite, it finds less to disturb it. Here order has prevailed, and there is a quiet efficiency about the way in which folders have been stacked, their edges squared off in alignment with the desktop, and the ribbons binding them tied in bows of equal length; about the emptiness of the wastepaper basket, and the dust-free surfaces of the well-mannered shelves. There is a stillness here out of keeping with Slough House, and if one were to seesaw between these two rooms, the bossman's lair and Catherine Standish's bolt-hole, a balance might be found that could bring peace to the premises, though one would imagine it would be short-lived.

As is dawn's presence in Catherine's room, for time is hurrying on. On the next level down is a kitchen. Dawn's favourite meal is breakfast, which is sometimes mostly gin, but either way it would find little to sustain it here, the cupboards falling very much on Scrooge's end of the Dickensian curve, far removed from Pickwickian excess. The cupboards contain no tins of biscuits, no jars of preserves, no emergency chocolate and no bowls of fruit or packets of crispbread mar the counter's surface; just odds and ends of plastic cutlery, a few chipped mugs and a surprisingly new-looking kettle. True, there is a fridge, but all it holds are two cans of energy drink, both stickered "Roddy Ho," each of which rubric has had the words "is a twat" added, in different hands, and an uncontested tub of hummus, which is either mint-flavoured or has some other reason for being green. About the appliance hangs an odour best described as delayed decay. Luckily, dawn has no sense of smell.

Having briefly swept through the two offices on this floor-nondescript rooms whose colour schemes can only be found in ancient swatches, their pages so faded, everything has subsided into shades of yellow and grey-and taken care to skirt the dark patch beneath the radiator, where some manner of rusty leakage has occurred, it finds itself back on the staircase, which is old and rickety, dawn the only thing capable of using it without making a sound-apart, that is, from Jackson Lamb, who when he feels like it can wander Slough House as silently as a newly conjured wraith, if rather more corpulent. At other times Lamb prefers the direct approach, and attacks the stairs with the noise that a bear pushing a wheelbarrow might make, if the wheelbarrow was full of tin cans, and the bear drunk.

More watchful ghost than drunken bear, dawn arrives in the final two offices and finds little to distinguish them from those on the floor above, apart, perhaps, from the slightly stuccoed texture of the paintwork behind one desk, as if a fresh coat has been applied before the wall has been properly cleaned, and some lumpy matter has been left clinging to the plasterwork: best not to dwell on what this might be. For the rest, this office has the same air of frustrated ambition as its companions, and to one as sensitive as light-fingered dawn it contains, too, a memory of violence, and perhaps the promise of more to come. But dawn understands that promises are easily broken-dawn knows all about breaking-and the possibility delays it not one jot. On it goes, down the final set of stairs, and somehow passes through the back door without recourse to the shove this usually requires, the door being famously resistant to casual use. In the dank little yard behind Slough House dawn pauses, aware that its time is nearly up, and enjoys these last cool moments. Once upon a time it might have heard a horse making its way up the street; more recently, the happy hum of a milk float would have whiled away its final minute. But today there is only the scream of an ambulance, late for an appointment, and by the time its banshee howl has ceased bouncing off walls and buildings dawn has disappeared, and here in its place is the day itself, which, once within Slough House's grasp, turns out to be far from the embodiment of industry and occupation it threatened to be. Instead-like the day before it, and the one before that-it is just another slothful interlude to be clock watched out of existence, and knowing full well that none of the inhabitants can do anything to hasten its departure, it takes its own sweet time about setting up shop. Casually, smugly, unbothered by doubt or duty, it divides itself between Slough House's offices, and then, like a lazy cat, settles in the warmest corners to doze, while nothing much happens around it.

Other Books

The Catch: A Novella. British spy master Mick Herron returns with an explosive novella set in the same world as his multiple CWA Dagger-winning Slough House series. John Bachelor is the saddest kind of spy: not a joe in the field, not even a desk jockey, but a milkman—a part-time pension administrator whose main job is to check in on aging retired spies. Late in his career and having lost his wife, his house, and his savings after a series of unlucky choices, John's been living in a dead man's London apartment, hoping the bureaucracy isn't going to catch up with him and leave him homeless. But keeping a secret among spies is a fool's errand, and now John has made himself eminently blackmailable.

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