

# The Critics



## NEW FICTION



### A Most Wanted Man

by John Le Carre  
Hodder & Stoughton £18.99  
£17.10 inc p&p  
(0845 155 0713)  
★★★★★

A traumatised Chechen Muslim asylum-seeker arrives illegally in Hamburg, where his cause is taken up by a feisty, idealistic German human rights lawyer. Her investigation leads them to an English private banker, caught up in the grubby world of international money-laundering.

Although this is his 22nd novel, John Le Carre is showing no signs of relinquishing his unarguable status as the doyen of the spy thriller. His compelling narrative encompasses illegal immigration, terrorism and extraordinary rendition, but he never loses sight of the human dimension of his characters.

Gripping and full of suspense, this book is at the same time a compassionate and intelligent response to the dark undercurrents of our times.



### The Elegance Of The Hedgehog

by Muriel Barbery  
Corgi £12.99  
£12.99 inc p&p  
(0845 155 0713)  
★★★★★

Renee is the elderly concierge of a smart Paris apartment block. To her rich employers she is the very embodiment of her position: overweight and unremarkable. Yet beneath her humpen exterior lurks a fierce intelligence and a perceptive understanding of the shallow, unhappy lives of the building's residents. Then a new arrival in a vacant apartment upstairs changes everything.

With its unashamed philosophising and occasional forays into Kantian idealism, it would be easy to dismiss *The Elegance Of The Hedgehog* as merely a piece of pretentious whimsy. But after a slightly ponderous beginning it gradually opens out to reveal considerable charm and wit, and at its heart is a wise and affecting testimony to the human spirit.

Simon Humphreys



**LETHAL WEAPONS:** Men from the Special Boat Service are among the military elite

# A Special breed of British hero

long with football, cricket and rugby, Britain can claim to have given the idea of special forces to the world. We were the first to use and properly organise small, ruthless groups that operate behind enemy lines and wreak havoc.

Armies came late to the idea. Until the 20th Century, prevailing military culture considered guile and concealment to be rather unsporting. But we, the champions of fair play, have proved as successful in exporting the special forces concept as we have our favourite games.

In Afghanistan today you cannot move without tripping over elite units of Australians, Poles, even Estonians, all of whom take the Special Air Service as their model. The notion that their work is somehow ignoble disappeared long ago, and the upper reaches of the Army are studded with men who have done time with the SAS.

The public perception of special forces is that they require even more courage than regular troops. It is not a view that anyone who has seen 'ordinary' British troops stepping out of their bases every day into the bomb-infested lanes of Helmand would necessarily endorse. But the footsoldiers' brand of bravery is dogged and routine. The nature of special forces operations lends itself to outstanding displays of heroism:



Patrick Bishop

### Special Forces Heroes

by Michael Ashcroft

Headline Review £20 £18 inc p&p  
(0845 155 0713)

★★★★★

the sorts of feats Michael Ashcroft sets out to celebrate.

The author is better known as Lord Ashcroft: zillionaire and deputy chairman of the Tory party. Since

childhood he has been fascinated by military derring-do and has amassed the world's biggest collection of special-forces medals.

He starts with a little-known episode from the Crimean War, which is when he believes the history of British special forces raids began. A Navy lieutenant, John Bythesea, aided by a mysterious stoker called Johnstone or Johanssen, cooked up a plan to hijack a delivery of dispatches to a Russian fort on an island in the Baltic. They rowed ashore, ambushed the messenger party then fled with captured documents and three prisoners. Both were awarded the newly created Victoria Cross for their exploits.

From then on, there is a succession of stories of heroism and endurance from both world wars and the shad-

owy conflicts in places such as Oman and Northern Ireland.

Ashcroft believes that courage comes in two broad categories: 'spur of the moment bravery and cold courage'. This book deals mostly with the second variety, the 'truly special sort of valour to go undercover behind enemy lines or to be part of a small, elite unit on a hit and run raid against a far larger force'. If the mission goes wrong, the soldier faces at best capture and imprisonment, at worst torture and death.

Some of the operations seem startling in their almost lunatic boldness. They include the mission led by Lt Col Geoffrey Keyes in 1941 to attack Rommel's headquarters 250 miles behind enemy lines in Libya. It took three days to reach the target, by which time only three of the men were able to take part in the final assault. The operation turned out to be pointless: Rommel was not there and all but two of the 30-man force were captured or killed, including Keyes, who received a posthumous VC.

The last episode to be recounted in detail is the spectacular rescue by the SAS and Parachute Regiment of British soldiers being held by the West Side Boys militia in Sierra Leone in 2001.

Ashcroft writes with engaging schoolboy enthusiasm, steering clear of analysing the motives or psyches of his subjects. Therefore, the book is essentially a string of rattling yarns, but it is none the worse for that.

Patrick Bishop's wartime romance, *A Good War*, has just been published in paperback by Hodder and Stoughton.

## The pirates even have their own cartoon strip

From Page 9

past 20 years living in a crumbling ruin in Galcaio, last week received money from 'friends of friends' to fund his journey to Hoby, where he is expecting to take part in the next attack.

'Everyone knows that piracy is the only activity round here that pays well,' he says.

Membership of 'The Coast Guards' family is regarded as a prestigious badge of honour among many in Somalia. It

provides instant credit with traders and free access past checkpoints. The pirates have even become the heroes of a popular cartoon strip in which beautiful women snub the militiamen in favour of these new lords of the sea.

However, the hijacking of food-aid shipments, which 40 per cent of the country depends on, is beginning to hit the pirates' status, as is the impact that the huge influx of US dollars is having on a region of so many have-nots.

The authorities in Puntland have

now instituted a clampdown and proudly display a hundred or so pirates in the packed prison in Boosasso.

Among them, there are nine men apprehended last month by the French army during a patrol in Somali waters, and who are now facing 'between 15 years' jail and the death penalty', according to Bile Qabowsade, spokesman for the Puntland authorities.

The pirates, however, are unrepentant, seizing nine ships in the past two weeks alone and demanding an extraordinary

£15million ransom for the *Sirius Star*. In an area crossed by 30,000 ships every year and containing 2.5 million square miles of sea in which to hide, they know the odds are with them.

The major worry now is that piracy, like the opium trade in Afghanistan, has become so lucrative that it will further fuel the civil war that has raged in Somalia for a generation. The question for the developed world is just how much military force it is prepared to deploy to prevent this happening.