

JOURNEY INTO FEAR
A lost Eric Ambler story
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A reviewer of the work of suspense author Eric Ambler once wrote that one of the keys to Ambler's popularity with the public was his unique ability to use regular, everyday people in unusual situations.

"The amateur as protagonist," Ronald Ambrosetti wrote in "Dimensions of Detective Fiction," "succeeds for Ambler by reducing all of the angst of international intrigue to a very personal level...Ambler gets the edge on suspense by making his spy-detective an average person—the reader identifies easily."

It was this very technique that Ambler was to employ in a largely forgotten story of his, though the title of the story may sound familiar. It was called "Journey Into Fear."

It is not, however, the famous thriller written by Ambler in the early 1940s and adapted by Orson Welles into a memorable film (another film version was also subsequently produced in 1974). This "Journey Into Fear" was a pilot for a proposed television series developed by Ambler and producer William Dozier in 1965, targeted for the 1966-67 season on NBC. However, the proposed series, to star film actor Jeffrey Hunter, did not sell, and has collected dust in film vaults ever since.

Of course, Eric Ambler was a renowned novelist when he and Dozier began to develop the program in the summer of 1965, but he was well-acquainted with film and television, as well.

Many of Ambler's most famous novels had already been written by this time, including "Journey Into Fear," "The Dark Frontier," "Background to Danger," and "Epitaph for a Spy." All of these had been written prior to the outbreak of World War II. Ambler began his six-year stint in the British Army in 1940, and wouldn't write another novel for many years.

During the War, Ambler was put to work making almost one hundred training and educational films for the army. This work was to pique Ambler's curiosity enough that he began a career in Hollywood. His subsequent screenplays included "Two Cities" (1947), "One Woman's Story" (1949), "Highly Dangerous" (1951), the Oscar-nominated "The Cruel Sea" (1953), "The Wreck of the Mary Deare" (1959), and "Topaki" (1964).

During this same period, many of his novels were being adapted into films, including "Background to Danger," "The Mask of Dimitrios," and "Epitaph for a Spy"

(as “Hotel Reserve”). “Epitaph” was also adapted for television, as an episode of the “Climax!” series.

The author was no stranger to Hollywood in another, more personal, way. His second wife was Joan Harrison, the multi- talented producer for Alfred Hitchcock’s television program, and later for the suspense anthology “Journey to the Unknown.”

Ambler also created his own television detective series, “Checkmate,” which ran on CBS from 1960-62. The series focused on a group of detectives who tried to prevent crimes and protect the innocent. The series starred Anthony George, Doug McClure, Sebastian Cabot, and Jack Betts.

But by 1965, Hollywood was all abuzz with the espionage craze. In movie theatres, the James Bond films were huge hits, with the Matt Helm and Derek Flint series soon to follow. On television, the premiere of “The Man From Uncle” in 1964 was spawning all kinds of spy action, including “I Spy,” “Amos Burke—Secret Agent,” and eventually the most successful television espionage program of them all, “Mission: Impossible.”

At the time, Dozier was head of his Greenway Productions company (think “Batman” and “The Green Hornet”). Dozier and Ambler traded letters in the summer of 1965, and got the ball rolling on what would become “Journey Into Fear.”

Creator Ambler called “Journey Into Fear” a ‘new, one hour action-suspense-adventure-romance television series,’ and his series proposal laid out the bones of the proposed program.

The SPECIAL EXECUTIVE COORDINATION (SEC) unit is one of the most secret parts of the CIA. Its function is to verify intelligence information with a field evaluation before an attempt is made to purchase or otherwise obtain the data. This would spare the agency from the problem of obtaining bogus intelligence information.

Ambler wrote: “What was needed on those occasions, it was decided, was a man with advanced scientific training who could be rapidly put into the field long enough to evaluate the intelligence material in question, and then, just as rapidly, be withdrawn.”

That man was the lead character of “Journey Into Fear,” Dr. Howard Graham, described as a 35 year old, M.I.T. graduate and physicist at Frosch Systems in California. But Ambler made it clear that “care should be exercised to see that Graham’s character is not broadened...to the extent that he becomes a conventional derring-do secret agent. Attempts may, from time to time, be made to train him that way, but they should not succeed.”

As Ambler envisioned it, Graham would usually be accompanied in the field with an agent from the SEC, and the ‘field’ could be a foreign country, or the United States.

Ambler's story proposals had Graham taking on jobs all over the world, evaluating information, and involving counter-intelligence.

Ambler's story springboards covered the gamut. "The Small Risk" sent Graham to a Redland satellite country to determine if a scientist wishing to defect was the genuine article; "Goodwill Tour" had Graham posing as a double agent scientist working in a New Mexico laboratory; "The Scorched Earth Man" had Graham investigating an anti-crop virus developed in Europe; "The Penetrator," in which Graham attends a scientific conference in Paris and becomes the target of enemy agents; and "Seller's Market"-- the story eventually produced.

In "Seller's Market," Graham and an SEC agent are sent to San Rosario, the capital of a Central American state, where he must verify information on a missile guidance system being offered by one of the region's many freelance agents. The agent claims to have details about the missile system, reportedly developed by German scientists working in Egypt.

"Seller's Market" went into production in late 1965, the usual time of the calendar in those years for pilots to be produced. It was written by Ambler, with Joan Harrison serving as producer, and Hitchcock show veteran Robert Stevens directing. Dozier served as executive producer through Greenway Productions in association with 20th Century Fox Television.

Cast as Dr. Graham, Jeffrey Hunter was making his third television pilot in as many years. He had previously starred in the 1963 pilot that sold his "Temple Houston" TV western to NBC, and he also starred in the original 1965 pilot for "Star Trek," but bailed out before that series was sold. Hunter had also been offered the lead role in "Checkmate" in 1960, but had declined to pursue film roles.

As reported by Variety, the pilot was produced and presented to NBC in early 1966. The producers had high hopes the series would sell. (Hedda Hopper confidently reported on January 13th that Dozier had another series "coming up.") NBC, however, had other ideas.

The network did schedule a new espionage series to premiere in the fall of 1966, but it was not Ambler's show. Instead, network executives selected "The Girl from Uncle," a spin-off from "The Man from Uncle."

"We were surprised," Charles Fitzsimmons, a long-time Dozier business associate, said in an interview. "It was a good show, and Hunter a good performer in it. But you can never tell why networks do the things they do."

"The Girl from Uncle," starring Stephanie Powers, lasted just one season.

Very few people ever saw "Journey Into Fear." In those days, rejected pilots often made it on the air as individual episodes of anthology programs like "Bob Hope Presents

the Chrysler Theatre” and “Kraft Suspense Theatre.” Unfortunately, “Journey Into Fear” was not one of them, and film negatives were shipped off to 20th Century vaults.

For Jeffrey Hunter, the loss represents the line in the sand for his Hollywood career. Up until early 1966, he had been a busy, workman-like actor in many Hollywood films and television programs. But from 1966 until he died in 1969, the quality of Hunter’s career fell off and his reputation suffered.

Eric Ambler eventually stopped working in film and television. “...I wanted to get back to my own work, it’s very difficult if you leave it too long,” he told one interviewer. “...if you’re writing books you’re in absolute control...”

Ambler is recognized as one of the grand masters of the suspense novel. His later work included “The Levanter” and “Doctor Frigo.”

And now you can add to the list one largely forgotten Eric Ambler story, a 1966 television pilot-- “Journey Into Fear.”