

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Attending *Night School*: Leadership lessons at the Jack Reacher Academy

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(Received 6 November 2018; accepted 31 March 2019; first published online 8 May 2019)

Abstract

Night School is the 21st novel by Lee Child featuring the action hero Jack Reacher. As the title suggests, the novel performs a didactic function via an organizational comedy. By invoking James Joyce's *Ulysses* and his use of double plots, we focus our attention on Reacher as a model leader who occupies a middle space between extremes. He rejects type-set mechanistic responses to problems and navigates around the confusion raised through information overload. Reacher's leadership is enacted on the ground and in the moment, taking each new encounter as an opportunity to learn. His style, marked by a healthy distrust of authority and documents, an ability to follow the spirit of the law and staying flexible are all characteristic of a man who is continually aware of his environment, and not side-tracked by metaphysical constructs. The novel's denouement presents an assessment of both Reacher's and our learning.

Keywords: comedy; leadership; education; military; novel

Introduction

Night School is the 21st novel by Lee Child in the Jack Reacher series and it functions as a prequel to the 23 existing novels. The work is set in the late 1990s when the protagonist, Jack Reacher, is still serving in the US army as a Military Policeman. In *Night School* Jack gets sent back to school. It is not, however, Jack that is afforded instruction; rather, it is we the readers who are taken back to school by Child.¹ *Night School* is a best-selling work of crime fiction readily available all over the world (especially airport bookstores where they stand right alongside the latest business success stories). *Night School*, which we show here via a close reading of the work (and, perhaps, also appreciative inquiry), can also be read as a didactic organizational comedy and 'leadership' manual participating in the same ancient tradition as Castiglione's ([1561] 1967) *The Book of the Courtier*, and perhaps also Gervais and Merchant's (2001) *The Office*.² *Night School* entertains

¹Lee Child is the pen name for Jim Grant. Born in 1953 in the UK, Jim Grant studied the law and then after graduation became a presentation director at Granada Television in Manchester. He was made redundant in 1995 and turned to novel writing, relocating to the USA where he changed his name to Lee Child.

²*Night School* potentially takes us back to the ancient tradition of 'leadership' texts before they became non-fiction works, bound to the stylistic decorum of the social sciences, and differentiated from entertainment(s), for a specialized adult audience. The 'scare quotes' used here are to flag the problems apropos the historic continuity of the word/concept leadership. Modern, specialized usage does not appear to mesh too well with a more ancient approach that treats 'leadership' in encyclopaedic fashion and as an integrated concern, involving ethics, politics, religion, rhetoric and diplomacy. While offering up *Night School* as a leadership text may seem unconventional today, considering it historically, it is actually a return to what has been the mainline approach to leadership instruction.

and educates, provides lessons in the ‘economics of attention’ (Lanham, 2007), and talks about significant issues at the intersection of leadership and authority (and the interplay between the two). Students at the Jack Reacher Academy are encouraged to follow a curriculum, set by Lee Child and operationalized by Reacher, in order to (re)learn and (re)develop their understandings of leadership, authority and organizations, and receive guidance on how to ‘successfully’ navigate the labyrinth (and comedy) of early-21st century organizational life.

Here, this article focuses on surfacing the lessons to be had at what we are calling the ‘Jack Reacher Academy’. Our hope is that this project honours Ken Parry’s life, work and legacy, specifically that aspect of his legacy that is hard to articulate and is often over looked. We hold that Parry’s influence extends, primarily, from touching others through dialogue. The transformative impact he had on the people in the classroom, supervision relationships and during the run of everyday life (through embodied encounter and speech) far outstrips the impact of his published, academic works.

Perhaps, the closest approximation of Parry’s legacy in print can be glimpsed, albeit imperfectly, in a posthumously published paper coauthored with Kempster (2018). The article is structured as a *dialogue* and its significance owes at least as much (if not more) to its form as it does to any claims within that article. Dialogue, as with touch, is constituted by the gap or interval and the interplay between *two* rather than connection and a collapse into a relationship of identity. McLuhan illustrated the principle via his reflections on the wheel and the axel (McLuhan & McLuhan, 1988). Without the gap and play, there would be seizure and disfunction. When the gap or interval between participants in dialogue either becomes too close or too distant, the dialogue breaks down and/or becomes something else (e.g., a debate or merely an exchange). But when the interval is just right, the ‘magic’ can happen. The dialogue structure allows Kempster and Parry to grapple with the notion of ‘leader’ and openly express their disquiet about some forms, while respectfully pushing each other towards alternative constructs, experimenting in language to find ways forward for the field. The dialogue keeps the subject matter – leadership and its contexts – open and lively, while also creating a space for the readers to participate in and reconstruct within him-/herself the movements of minds. In (living) dialogue there is *always* more to say.

These reflections on touch, dialogue and (inter)play apropos Ken Parry’s legacy have immediate relevance here because they also help surface the *scope*, *limits* and *kind* of this article. We have sought to honour Ken by offering up the kind of project that he might have enjoyed, and used in his dialogues to challenge deeply held assumptions.³ What we have not sought to do is directly ‘connect’, map or match the lessons we help uncover in *Night School* back to any particular utterance of Parry. Nor, for that matter, do we dwell extensively on the connections between the lessons in the text and claims made by other leadership and management scholars, other than to flag the continuity of our project with those who have also sought to use ‘fictional’ works to stimulate dialogue about leadership. The project we undertake here has its roots and theoretical foundations in the work of Guillet de Monthoux and Czarniawska-Joerges (1994), and Parker’s (2018) use and explorations of James Bond. We rely on these scholars to provide the epistemological and methodological justifications for our approach here which, in turn, allows us to stay focused on the task at hand – close reading.

We also claim that it is then both natural and fitting to acknowledge Ken Parry’s legacy in this way to the degree that we can regard Parry as something of a Jack Reacher-type character. Specifically, Ken is not unlike the Jack Reacher of *Night School*, a figure who is not to be confused

³We note from an obituary that in 2014 Ken gave a talk at Lancaster University where ‘he used the riff from Deep Purple’s *Smoke on the Water* to illustrate that leadership is so much more than a person’ (Billsberry, Kempster, & Jackson, 2018: 330). *Smoke on the Water* was one of the works which the first author used in a former profession with students learning music. Its repeated riff provides an excellent ostinato for basic improvising and can be easily played on a guitar by a beginner, making it accessible to all students.

with other Jack Reachers. At the time of writing, there are 23 full-length Jack Reacher novels written over 23 years (1997–2018). There are two Jack Reacher films, starring Tom Cruise (with perhaps more to come), and a growing secondary literature built around the character (see, e.g., the works of Dianne Capri). Parry, like the Reacher found here, played the role of the teacher-leader. He was always learning from experiences as the Jackson and Parry (2008) *Very Short* text attests, both in its range of insights and its global reach. He was an encyclopaedist, explorer and figure always questioning, and with a child-like freedom to learn (albeit a ‘freedom’ achieved, maintained and sustained by Reacher 24/7 through great [ascetic] discipline). Parry found ways to open up, to locate the unexpected and surprising in the everyday, and he called attention to the simple, banal and commonplace in a way that energized others to do the same. Like Reacher, Parry was engaged in freeing his students from ‘oppressive structures’ (Amanda Sinclair, quoted by Jackson & Parry, 2008: 113), particularly those repetitive, circular and closed structures of thought and being. Readers will find *and make* more similarities as this article unfolds.

Before proceeding, there are a few caveats and guidelines to our readers that warrant mentioning. The first is incompleteness; our article is far from a complete survey of *Night School*. There are significant gaps in our focal novel; these should be seen as an invitation to readers to participate in a dialogue with the work. Indeed, this *is* the work of the artist author: to provide sufficient *blanks* that invite the reader to make more complete that which is incomplete. Iser (1995) describes this as a ‘dyadic and dynamic interaction’ (p. 22) between the text and the reader; a process that prompts both meaning-making and action. Iser says:

As the reader passes through the various perspectives offered by the text, and relates the different views and patterns to one another, [she or] he sets the work in motion, and so sets [her- or] himself in motion too (p. 21).

Therefore, the Reacher of *Night School* is as much a creation of the reader as he is of the author. To this end, our task here is to highlight particular elements of the story that we think speak directly to our community of leadership scholars in the hope that we extend the dialogue from the dyadic text-reader, to the triadic text-reader-interested academics.

Secondly, it is our hope that both those familiar with Child’s work and those who are new to Jack Reacher look to approach the text with fresh eyes and suspend what you may think you know already. The reason is that, on the surface at least, Reacher may appear to be a misogynist thug, psychologically disturbed macho anti-hero and exemplar of toxic masculinity who all-too-often resorts to brawling and violence. Further, it might be presumed that lessons to be had at the Jack Reacher Academy are starkly at odds with contemporary leadership scholarship that is trending away from a single heroic figure towards dynamic collaboration (Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011). We, however, have not found of these Reachers in the text. Rather, we observe a man skilled both in hand-to-hand combat and firearms, and uses both in his quest for ‘truth’; yet his violence is not gratuitous. He is respectful of the women he encounters and seeks to work actively with them, while being aware of the sexual tensions that lurk continuously in the background. He is a reflexive character acting on a stage of organizational unknowing, making sense continually as the action unfolds. He represents a re-conception of leadership that implies that other forms perhaps must die because of the rigid space that they occupy. Lee Child has created a character who resonates with the zeitgeist of the age and with whom readers, both male and female identify, ‘warts and all’. Furthermore, although we might see Reacher resonating with the particular male audience in the USA, according to a recent interview with Child, the most readers per head of population are found in New Zealand (Hill & Child, 2018).

Finally, the reader might be well served with an outline of how the article unfolds. Our discussion, proper, begins with a reflection on the structure of *Night School*. This initial concern with form is because it is the key to nearly all of Child’s effects. By miming, or at least borrowing

heavily from James Joyce's *Ulysses*, particularly Joyce's use of double plots, Child is able to construct an organization comedy that performs a didactic function and permits us, the readers, to apprehend Jack Reacher as a model leader. In short, Child's miming of *Ulysses* calls attention to the environment and atmosphere that all leadership action and theory must contend with. The second movement of this paper is descriptive, looking directly at Jack Reacher and the lessons in leadership he affords. The focus, as one might expect in school, is on the fundamentals – 'fundamental' used here in the sense of being primary, foundational and architectonic. *Night School* examines and explores the relationships between leadership and authority; and power, to the degree that a distinction is necessary between the two. *Night School* via Reacher as a teacher models 'right' relations towards superiors (other leaders), organizational loyalties, quality assurance, documentation and the law. The third and final section presents an assessment of learning based on Reacher's last act in the novel and tests our moral and/or ethical reasoning against the lurking need for statistical justification. We conclude the essay with a broader discussion of Lee Child, and his potential impact on leadership education.

Comedy is the Context for C21st Leadership

A recent article in the *New York Times* documents an ongoing conversation between Lee Child and Andy Martin from the University of Cambridge. The encounter follows closely on the publication of *Make Me* (Martin, 2015) that provides Martin's account, after an extended period of close observation, of Lee Child's composition and writing practices prior to the publication of *Night School*. The encounter proceeded:

Lee Child: Listen to this: 'In the morning they gave Reacher a medal, in the afternoon they sent him back to school.' The first sentence of *Night School*. What do you think? I started writing it on September 1, as usual. And I turned around ... and you weren't there. Weird. I wanted to discuss the comma. The balance of the sentence. Should it be 'and'? I'll have to get back in the habit of talking to myself. Instead of you.

Andy Martin: Hold on. Eleven syllables, each side of the caesura. Diminished alexandrine. Nicely symmetrical. And that rhythm. Like a limerick. Did you know you were doing that? (Child & Martin, 2015, n. p.).

The conjunction Child and Martin were discussing found its way back into the published version of *Night School*. The book opens: 'In the morning they gave Reacher a medal, and in the afternoon they sent him back to school' (NS: 7).⁴ The sentence is key in that it has something of a holographic quality and it acts as a signpost to the readers by illuminating the ordering principle governing the entire narrative. The first part of the story or primary plot – receiving a medal – is the setup. The second story or plotline – back to school – provides the punchline by way of a surprising deviation from the expected. In sum, the very first sentence of *Night School* is constructed in a manner not unlike a joke. Subsequently, our attention as readers is attuned to the gap, or interval, and the attendant interplay that takes place *in-between* the two actions created by the oddly placed comma.⁵

Had Martin shifted his attention away from doubting the intention of Lee Child and whether or not Child was conscious of what he was doing and in control of his artistry, he might have seen and drawn attention to the extent that Child mimes or borrows from James Joyce, and in particular, *Ulysses* (Joyce, 1992). At the very heart of the complex framework of *Ulysses* is Joyce's use of double-ness (the first is evident in the very title and the apparent parallel of Homer's tale of Ulysses, or 'Odysseus' in the Greek). Here, of particular relevance is the parallel Joyce establishes

⁴Quotations from *Night School* throughout this essay are cited with the abbreviation NS.

⁵The joke is flagged insofar as the comma before and ('and') is itself, potentially, but not necessarily, a syntactical error.

between Bloom (one of the leading characters in *Ulysses*) and a bar of soap Bloom buys early in the morning. As Bloom moves around the city of Dublin so too does the lemon-flavoured soap, tracing the same course throughout the day in Bloom's pocket. Bloom and the piece of soap are made to be fellow wanderers. The technique of the double-plot – Bloom's adventures as the main plot and the adventures of the soap as the subplot – serves as a control device and permits Joyce to write on several levels simultaneously. The simple, banal and commonplace (the life of soap) is elevated to prominence just as the heroic (cosmological) adventures of Bloom are fused with the comic, banal and every day. In addition to radically upping the voltage (in and through allowing Joyce to write on several levels simultaneously), the technique also works to displace, to some degree, both the stories of Bloom and the soap, and focus our attention on the ground or medium for both – the city (Dublin), *and* writing itself.

Night School has a similar double-plot structure. The main plot of the story is an attempt by the USA military to identify and locate a mystery object that is being sold for \$100 million (which we learn is a packing box containing small nuclear weapons to be carried in a specially designed soldier's backpack). An interagency project team, made up of Jack Reacher and two other agents, must try and determine the identity and nature of known-unknowns by working backwards from effects (the 'thing' for sale) to causes (the identity and nature of the 'thing'), being sold by an unidentified AWOL American soldier to a mystery Middle Eastern terrorist organization. The appearance of unknown-unknowns produces an unanticipated plot twist (let us not forget that *Night School* is a page-turner), and, subsequently, the 'thing' ends up in the possession of a German, neo-Nazi organization. But there is also a subplot; the story of Jack Reacher's cargo pants, and how he came to be wearing these army-surplus trousers that are strangely in fashion again.

Since Reacher only has one pair of pants, they follow him around his adventures in the labyrinth/city of Hamburg as Bloom's soap, stowed in his pocket, follows him around Dublin. Child goes further and establishes an explicit parallel between the mystery object and Jack Reacher's pants. The nuclear weapons were 'lost' during the Cold War. At a time when the USA was spending 'billions of 1950s dollars' (NS: 317), one crate of small nuclear devices became misplaced on account of a cascade of errors beginning with poor records' management: 11s being read as 77s because of nuanced differences between German and US ways of writing numbers. The German habit is to place a small cross bar on the vertical stroke of the number 7 so as to differentiate it from a 1. The Americans have no such habit and thus, we are told, might interpret a handwritten 7 as a 1 or vice versa. A similar set of errors accounts for Jack Reacher's pants:

[Helmsworth] 'Those were the cargo manifests. A hundred out, and a hundred in. They matched all known army paperwork. But years later at the Livermore lab someone found an unsent invoice for an eleventh crate. Ten more Davy Crocketts [the name of the 'missing' bombs]. There was no coherent delivery paperwork. The production figures were ambiguous. It was possible an eleventh order was filled.'

[Reacher] 'But not paid for. Which is unlikely. Which means the invoice was probably the error. Possibly why it was never sent.'

'That was the initial conclusion,' Helmsworth said. [...]

'That's a lot of could-haves,' Reacher said. 'That's a cascade of three separate errors. Wrong delivery paperwork, wrong inventory code, and the invoice was never sent.'

'Every year we were spending billions of 1950s dollars on millions of tons of equipment. The sample size was enormous. It was a frenzy. There was scope for every kind of error. How long have you served, major?'

'Twelve years.'

'You ever known anything go wrong?'

Reacher glanced down at his pants. Marine Corps khakis, sewn in 1962, shipped in 1965, to the wrong branch of the service entirely, undiscovered for thirty years (NS: 315–317).

Just as with *Ulysses*, the double plots liberate *Night School* from operating at only one level. The two plots also serve as modifiers for each other in much the same way as Bloom and his soap. The two plots similarly concentrate our involvement and attention on the middle term(s) which, in this case, is the *cause* of both plots – the problem of authority written large.⁶ *Night School* is built on the farcical and comedic situation where the most minor of clerical errors, compounded by commonplace bureaucratic, organizational and logistic procedures, might literally result in a cataclysmic nuclear event and the end of the world as we know it. *Night School* is, in effect, an organizational comedy and/or office drama!

A concern with the quality, quantity, status, meaning and the right postures to adopt in the face of documentation is central and everywhere apparent throughout *Night School*. This central concern is raised to a fever pitch because the US military, for whom Reacher works, are floundering. They, like many large corporations in the OECD, are in control of a digital communication and surveillance architecture with global reach. Yet they are uncertain if not unable to determine what is significant or relevant in the sea of raw data. In short, the immediate context for this office drama is what is sometimes called *information overload* (Walgrave & Dejaeghere, 2017).

Participants in the drama are presented as mechanical marionettes being busy, acting out institutional and bureaucratic protocols (such as organizing hollow and meaningless medal ceremonies), pervaded by boredom and inattention. Or, they are described as being locked into ‘hair on fire’ mode, attending to and reacting to everything because they do not know *what is relevant* (NS: 22). Subsequently, most of the drama involves either wading through the mass of information produced by office holders ‘covering their asses’ (NS: 114 & 206).

In Hamburg it was lunch time, and Chief of Detectives Griezman was minutes away from a fine spread in a cellar restaurant not far from his office. But first he had work to finish. Part of his role as chief was to pass on intelligence to those who needed it. Like an editor, or a curator. Someone had to be responsible. Someone’s fat ass had to get fired if the dots didn’t join up afterward. That’s why he got the big bucks, as they said on the television. Naturally he tended toward caution. Better safe than sorry. Practically everything got sent somewhere. Before lunch every day. He scanned carbons and Xeroxes and made separate labelled piles, for this agency and that. His secretary had them biked out, while he was eating (NS: 69).

Or, the problems and difficulties extending from the *lack* of appropriate documentation. For example, the Y2K ‘crisis’, which is also a significant feature of the narrative. The National Security Advisor, Alfred Radcliffe, from whom Reacher takes orders, believed, initially, the problem they were dealing with was based on the Y2K dilemmas. The small ‘problem’ was with wrongly inscribed digits when operating systems were created for early personal computers.

[Ratcliffe said] ‘To save bits they wrote the year as two digits, not four. As in, 1960 was written as 60. 1961 was 61. And so on. They had to save space. All well and good. Except that was then and this is now, and before we know it 1999 is going to change to 2000, and no one

⁶The development and changes in the organization and in leadership across the 23 years of the Jack Reacher series would be a fascinating area for future research. So too would be a closer look at whether the series is merely an outworking of Jim Grant’s biography. This is an interesting turn of events in fleshing out Jack Reacher’s history. Curtis (2012) suggests that Lee Child a.k.a. Jim Grant uses Reacher as a way of working out his angst at his former employer Granada Television and the way it was systematically dismantled by a servant of Thatcherite policies: “an ugly twisted little man,” who came into breakup Granada’s union’ (n. p.). Jim Grant was a union leader at the time and actively resisted what he saw was ineptitude and outright nastiness at the way senior leaders managed the downsizing and subsequent redundancy processes. According to Curtis, Grant, the angry redundant television employee, transmogrified into the angry author Child, who outworks his fury through the oftentimes angry activist Reacher. When Curtis proposed to Child some years later that it was his anger that propelled the stories, Child replied ‘I will *never* stop being angry at them’ (n. p., emphasis in the original).

knows if the two-digit systems will roll over properly. They might think it's 1900 again. Or 19,100. Or zero. Or they might freeze solid. There could be catastrophic failures all around the world. We could lose utilities and infrastructure. Cities could go dark. Banks could crash. You could lose all your money in a puff of smoke. Not even smoke' (NS: 56).

Ratcliffe speculates that either a group of geeks had designed the software to deal with the problem and were selling their solution at a high price, or even worse, developers may have embedded viruses into the software to gain control of computer systems at will across the globe, or hold companies to ransom blackmailing them for solutions. But Ratcliffe confesses that no one actually knows, 'So it's a real mess' (NS: 56). The root of the mess is that the crisis cannot be diverted because there is not enough of the right documentation that would enable computer scientists to think straight and work backwards from the problem to find a solution.

They're all either long retired or long dead. And they didn't expect the programs to last more than a few years anyway. So there's no documentation. It was just a bunch of geeks standing around a lab bench, trying to figure things out. No one remembers the exact details (NS: 56).

The computer scientists, in the fullness of their creativity, are presented as specialists, operating in silos, flying-by-the-seat-of-their-pants and/or caught in a particular orientation towards time (lacking foresight or an awareness of the side-effects of their actions) so that they could not adequately document their innovations.

The Jack Reacher Academy

At the time of *Night School*, Jack Reacher is a 35-year-old (born in the early 1960s) white male serving as a Military Policemen for the US armed forces. He is coming off a big win (receipt of medal) on account of a previous mission in the Balkans where he was ordered to assassinate two local men, which was, paradoxically, 'all part of the peace process' (NS: 7). He is described as physically imposing: 6 feet 5 inches tall and muscled. His father was a US Marine and his mother French. Reacher is said to have grown up around the world (on various military bases) and he was fed on American mythology as opposed to having spent much time in the actual country. He also counts himself lucky be alive at 35. His self-assessment is that he must be doing something right which, in turn, suggests that he has seen significant, life-threatening experiences, and by virtue of skill, training and luck has managed to survive. Reacher is good at street-fighting (because he enjoys it), can cite Old Testament prophets (Hosea), does not carry any luggage and wears only the one set of clothes he owns. Beyond these very scant and surface details, however, Reacher is something of a no-one or nobody, akin to the Homeric hero, Odysseus (or, in Latin, 'Ulysses'), the man of many turnings. When he first enters the classroom, 'The dark-haired guy said, "Who are you?" Reacher said, "That depends on who you are"' (NS: 13).

In place of explicit details, Child creates the conditions where we can come to know Jack Reacher by filling in the gaps. We are not told how Reacher was educated but we deduce that it was encyclopaedic in scope, because Reacher's 'method' is expressed in terms of choreography, aesthetics, hermeneutics, phenomenology, anthropology and/or human geography, suggesting practical exposure to the full circle of the arts, both 'trivial' and 'quadrivial'.

Child also creates and sustains Reacher's identity in and through comparison and contrast, and by situating him in-between. Reacher cannot be accessed head-on, as a figure independent of ground. Rather, Reacher must be located and found to embody a middle space; and it is from the *middle* that Reacher dances and teaches. Furthermore, Jack Reacher's lessons are, invariably, lessons in the middle way, what the ancient Greeks referred to as the

golden mean or golden middle way.⁷ Therefore, Reacher's positioning and subsequent postures are the lessons.

To put flesh on the skeleton, and to arrive at the lessons of *Night School*, we need to engage with the concrete particulars of the story and how Child positions Reacher, early in narrative time, squarely in the middle. On the vertical axis, he is or was a 'boss of something' (NS: 126) yet accountable to chain-of-command protocols that govern the military. Reacher operates from within the system, and he must continually measure his actions and plans against bureaucratic mandates and controls. On a horizontal axis, he is positioned between his two 'classmates': Casey Waterman from the FBI with his buzz cut hair who sits almost passively preserving his strength; and John White from the CIA with long black hair whose body is always moving, twitching in an agitated manner with an analyst's demeanour.

Waterman was very still. But watchful. He was passing the time and conserving his energy. He had done so before [...] White was never still...An analyst, Reacher guessed, after many years in a world of unreliable data and double, triple, and quadruple bluffs. The guy was entitled to look a little agitated (NS: 14).

In total, there are three men from three different silos; competing organizations within the broader military, intelligence and judicial apparatus. Reacher is the in-between figure; his repose is neither passive, like Waterman, nor active and agitated, as is White. As a middle way individual, Reacher's sensibilities are also positioned by way of comparison and contrast. His very mode of being in the world is established as being neither conformed to the modes of 'civilized' eye nor the 'tribal' ear of the terrorists, nor their respective ways of communicating.

To come at the matter from another angle, again by way of evoking the parallel with *Ulysses*, we can say that Reacher is something of an amalgam of Joyce's characters Stephen and Bloom – Stephen the speculative man who is interested in the creative and theoretical (passive), and Bloom with his bias towards the practical and pragmatic (as opposed to the discarnate, surveilling eye of the data analysts). Positioning Reacher in this way is developed throughout as Reacher, like Stephen/Bloom, makes his discoveries while wandering the maze of sensation that is the modern city (in this case, Hamburg, Germany). Reacher pays attention to the everyday banal, and his mode of research that is literally on the ground (at the coal face, as it were) because: 'We can't solve this [at a distance] on paper' (NS: 42).

Reacher also affords ample time for nonpurposive behaviours including making *time* to walk around to find a coffee, have his haircut (the site of the decisive clue), and most importantly, to reflect and to make decisions. Many of Reacher's discoveries come as epiphanies – moments of contemplation in the flux of experience wherein there is a 'coming to light', 'appearance' and/or 'manifestation', where the particular what-ness of something is revealed and emerges from the sensory data. Reacher's middle way is contrasted with the research-at-a-distance strategies of Waterman and White, and those of the terrorists. Unlike the analysts for the US military, who are wearied and weighted down by what they know, Reacher appears to be energized by each new finding.

There are more 'lessons' in *Night School* than we can account for. There are four, however, that deserve mention given they are so central and fundamental to leadership, and because they talk to organizational drama and office life in an age of information overload. The lessons which we will explore revolve around Reacher's calculated distrust of authority, and written documents. We also consider how Reacher is able to stay flexible, and avoid getting bogged down in the letter (as opposed to the spirit) of the law.

⁷Courage, for example, is a virtue that sits somewhere between leisure and fear. If courage is in excess then it is reckless, and if deficient then cowardice (Plato, 1997).

Fostering a healthy distrust of authority

Reacher is a patriot; he respects the ideals of his country while at the same time holding a healthy distrust. It is this ability to believe in and accept his country's ideals while at the same time maintaining an objective distance from those same ideals which define his patriotism. He has an open disposition towards his country and acknowledges the myths which forge its identity, yet he does not adhere blindly to his country's values in the same way that the men he encounters who want to claim Germany for Germans (whatever that means). The American they are seeking, Wiley, is deemed by Reacher to be unpatriotic and although Wiley is 'American' through citizenship, the wealth that he will gain from selling the nuclear weapons will allow him to set up home outside of the USA with a new identity. As Reacher and Griezman get closer to Wiley, Griezman questions Reacher about patriotism.

[Reacher] 'He's betraying his country. Which is also mine.'

[Griezman] 'Do you love your country, Mr Reacher?'

'Major Reacher.'

'Perhaps that answers my question.'

'I prefer to think of it as healthy yet sceptical respect.'

'Not very patriotic.'

'Exactly patriotic. My country, right or wrong. Which means nothing, unless you admit your country is wrong sometimes. Loving a country that was right all the time would be common sense, not patriotism' (NS: 217).

He adopts a similar posture when dealing with his immediate superiors and this informs how he communicates with them. Reacher continually makes judgements about the right quantity of data to share. In contrast with Griezman, who will tell his superiors everything, Reacher does enough but not too much:

[Griezman] 'Do you not tell your superiors what they should know?'

[Reacher] 'I tell them as little as possible. Short words, no math, and no diagrams' (NS: 289).

Maths and diagrams may help generate theories, but in the process these artefacts become removed from the situation on the ground, blinding him to the possibilities that the situation itself presents. Theories can provide elegant metaphysical constructs but may, as a result, remove him from the present moment. The middle way that Reacher adopts allows him to avoid being trapped into abstract and hypothetical conclusions, and to create documentation that may be relevant and useable by others in contexts that extend beyond the immediacy of the situation.

Fostering a healthy distrust of documents

Reacher can suspend his judgment and assess information without becoming fixed and committed to any particular viewpoint. In an age where documentation grants ontological security, Reacher is suspicious of forms of written identification. Citizens validate their rights to services and support through documents like passports, credit cards, ID cards and driver's licences. Yet for Reacher, it is the person *themselves* present in the moment that determines their identity (in this respect he shares much in common with the 'tribal' terrorists). He is suspicious of individuals who rely on or adopt fixed and mechanical positions.

Reacher's orientation to documentation is clearly illustrated in the café scene. Two men follow Reacher and Neagley, and from all appearances they are American. Hair style, clothes and gait give them away as either current or ex-military men. Reacher and Neagley corner them at a café and threaten violence. The two men insist that they are German, and that Reacher is acting

unlawfully by forbidding them to leave the café. Unfazed, Reacher examines their identity cards which appear to prove that the men have German citizenship. They claim that they were recently naturalized Germans, but Reacher does not accept this documentation at face value. However, when pressed further by Reacher, they both fail the test of authenticity. One cannot name the State where the ID card was issued and the other cannot recite his name. Both men have clearly faked their identity and are unable to convincingly affirm their 'legend'. Their insistence on maintaining their fake identity pushes them towards a dogmatic Cartesian dualism where the existence of the body is confirmed by an artefact separate from the body, an ID card, and is contrasted with Reacher's ability to walk the middle way.

Following the 'spirit' as opposed to the letter of the law

Documents also affirm the law and grant legal permission to exercise authority, for example, when entering someone else's private property. This is often the case with police officers who require search warrants to search a private place of residence or work gained through the legal system. Yet Reacher's hermeneutic of suspicion in view of documents is also manifest in relation to acting according to the spirit of the law.

Reacher and his investigating team believe that they have located the apartment where Wiley (the American they are seeking) lives. They need access to the apartment in the first instance to arrest him, and if he is not there, to search the premises. They did the most obvious thing and rang the doorbell, but finding no answer, they decide to force entry. Reacher acts in accord with what he understands to be the 'spirit' of the law as opposed to the letter that binds Griezman to inaction.

Griezman said, 'We need a warrant.' Reacher said, 'Are you sure?'

'In Germany it is essential.'

'But he's American. And we're American. Let's do this the American way.'

'You need a warrant also. I have seen it in the movies. You have an Amendment.'

'And credit cards.'

'What for? To buy something? To pay someone off?'

'For ingenuity and self-reliance. That's the American way' (NS: 333).

Reacher's posture and choices in relation to the law are made more apparent when he uses a credit card to break into the apartment. Under normal circumstances, using a credit card involves a series of complex monetary promises being made and fulfilled. The user can purchase a product, and the issuing bank pays the vendor directly. In sequence, the purchaser promises to pay the bank the equivalent amount of money within an agreed period of days or agrees to pay interest to cover the extended period of debt. No actual money changes hands through any of these transactions, but rather, a series of metaphysical arrangements, which include matters of identity, are negotiated. In Reacher's hand, however, the card morphs from a marker of identity and promissory plastic, to a tool that can be appropriated at the moment to meet ends beyond its commercial, specialist purpose. The card is eased around the locking tongue so that the door can be wriggled open, giving them direct access to the room.

Staying flexible as opposed to being type-set

Earlier in the narrative, the three investigators called back to school are asked by NSA chief, Ratcliffe, to articulate the national security policy 'in simple plain English' (NS: 21). Waterman and White remain silent because of the apparent overwhelming complexities of the question. To turn a complex bureaucratic policy into plain English would demand first that they clarify and define all the key terms within the policy. As an exemplar of middle way thinking,

Reacher jumps beyond the actual policy to question the question itself. He rightly concludes that the policy does not exist, but then only to be challenged by Ratcliffe, “You think we’re incompetent?”, Reacher replies, “No. I think the world is changing. Better to stay flexible” (NS: 22).

The point can be pressed further in that the targets of all Reacher’s actions are, in a sense, people behaving as machines or marionettes: persons behaving in a mechanical fashion and exhibiting *type-set* behaviours and habits which lack reflexivity, flexibility and adaptability. This is the case with the four young skinheads mentioned above, who insist on *repeating* their mantra ‘Germany is for Germans’ (NS: 49). These young men block his path to a bar because he looks like an American and therefore does not qualify as a German. Reacher responds to their repetitive, circular, *type-set* behaviours with a lecture:

[Reacher] ‘Doing the same thing over and over and hoping for a different outcome is insane, you know. You ever hear about that? That’s what doctors are saying now. I think it comes from Einstein. And he was German, right? Go figure’ (NS: 50).

Reacher’s theoretical lesson is accompanied by a concrete demonstration; he also beats up the Skinheads with brutal directness. Reacher takes out each in turn with a ‘straight right, to the solar plexus’ followed by an ‘elbow, smack between the eyes’, and then the same elbow ‘stabbing down like a knife’. The movement is completed with a ‘kick in the nuts’ for the fourth guy; all done straight and direct with ‘minimum effort [for] maximum reward’ (NS: 50–51).

Another character, Helmut Klopp, a resident of the former East Germany is similarly *type-set* and repeats the same mantra. Klopp is called in to help Reacher and Griezman with their investigation because he has an acute eye for matching sample photographs with people he has observed as he goes about his daily life and work, especially those who attended the same pubs as him. Klopp has an obsequious desire to help, but Reacher is not at all interested in using him any further. Reacher threatens violence because Klopp reiterates the same incantation/mantra as the four skinheads and the 75-year-old barman waiting for customers, yet Klopp states it with more clarity and accompanying resentment. We are informed that:

‘Mr Klopp trained as an auditor, in East Germany, and was second in command at a very large factory near the Polish border. He wishes us to understand he is overqualified for his current position. But all the better jobs here in the west are prohibited to ethnic Germans and given instead to people from Turkey’ (NS: 97).

Wylie, the American who has the nuclear weapons for sale, is similarly ‘*type-set*’ and trapped by his own modes of action. He displays no agency after making his initial decision to betray his country and for him it came down to ‘a sequence of simple mechanical tasks’ (NS: 248). By contrast, Reacher as the flexible middle way man at play continually confronts choice. Every new piece of information requires a response from him as he step-by-step makes sense of each new piece of data.

Assessment of Learning

It is expedient at this juncture to pause and offer a review of learnings. Reacher has taught us that leaders: (1) foster a healthy distrust of authority, (2) distrust documents, (3) attend to the spirit as opposed to the letter of the law and (4) stay flexible. However, in the review, additional lessons become apparent. Reacher reveals that the real issue is systemic or architectonic; deep seated problems at the level of order, authority and authoring (aka relationship to the constitutive order and constitutive problems). All other problems are a subset of or footnote to this meta-issue, and each of Reacher’s four lessons is *caused* by a need to respond to this meta-issue.

Reacher also shows us that leadership is to be found and exercised in and from the middle. The right posture of the leader is to occupy the (tactile) interval (that occupied by the original comma); between eye and ear, the bureaucracy/analyst and the tribe/rote-learner (nonspecialist/encyclopaedic generalist), between action and reaction (anticipatory response). *Night School* complicates what we may have hitherto understood and believed about leadership, for Reacher does not represent the kind of leader that came to be valued in the 20th century. He only carries the title 'Major', a mid-ranked officer position in the army; he has no compelling vision beyond fulfilling the mission that he is charged with; and he does not attract followers. Even Neagley cannot qualify as a follower, for although as a sergeant she is junior in rank to Reacher, in the narrative she is a collaborating equal. Rather than advocating for a grand plan or (strategic) vision that he works to and motivates followers to complete, we find instead a man with a range of competencies that he can draw on in the moment. Indeed, there are only two titular leaders in *Night School* – Ratcliffe and Dremmler – and neither is presented as models to be emulated. Ratcliffe's 'standard operating procedure is to run around with our hair on fire' (NS: 22), while Dremmler as his polar opposite is a purposive man with a clear vision of the future and, with the accidentally acquired nuclear bombs, the means to achieve that. Reacher leads from a middle place, between these extremes.

Night School also includes an assessment of learning and/or an exam question: Would you assassinate a man if you believed that in the future, he would do unspeakable harm even though right at that moment he had not broken any law? For Reacher it is a question that recalls debates and conversations he had with undergraduate classmates at West Point, explored in the objective and safe distance of the classroom. This became for Reacher 'a question for real' (NS: 391) and, as leaders in development, is set as our exam.

A blonde haired, solidly built, meat-eating man in a suit with a high lapel 'whose name was Dremmler' (NS: 198) becomes the final object of Reacher's animus. Throughout the novel, Dremmler is a shadowy figure, a small element in a double plot to find the American. Dremmler, however, becomes the main story. He is revealed to be a leader of a neo-Nazi movement *and* he comes to possess the nuclear weapons (although he does not know quite what he has in possession of). Dremmler as an echo of his name – Dremel – suggests, is captured by his own mechanistic view of the world and able only to repeat the circular mantra of the skinheads.⁸ He declares to Reacher:

'I'll make sure they get the country they deserve. Strong again. With purity of purpose. All pulling together in the same direction. No more dead wood. No more outside interference. Nothing of that kind will be tolerated. Germany will be for Germans' (NS: 390).

Reacher puts Dremmler back in the classroom and poses the same question asked of him and his peers at West Point.

'Some worried about degrees of certainty. What if you're only ninety per cent sure? Some said better safe than sorry. Which logically meant anything better than fifty per cent. But not really. Anything over one per cent might be worth it. A one-in-a-hundred chance of saving eighty million people from terror and misery? Do you have a view, Herr Dremmler?' (NS: 391).

Reacher presents the 'hardcore moral question' as a statistical problem: saving 80,000,000 by assassinating one; and reprises the responses of his fellow students.

⁸*Dremel* is an American brand of power tools widely known for high-quality rotary tools used by metalworkers and mold-making. Albert J. Dremel founded the company in 1932. It was subsequently sold to Robert Bosh Tool Corporation.

For Reacher, the answer is simple as he dispatches Dremmler with two shots, one to the heart and the second to the head. Reacher is decisive, but can we as leadership students rationalize his choice? Killing Dremmler seems at odds with his ability to continually suspend judgement (in the mode, say, of the phenomenologist or the quantum physicist). Usually Reacher's response to new data is to hold off making judgements until he has gained a more complete picture. The phrase 'Reacher said nothing', initially in response to him being sent back to school (NS: 10) is a leitmotif throughout the novel. Indeed, it is perhaps the theme that characterizes the entire Child oeuvre of Reacher novels (Martin, 2015).⁹ Why, then, would he murder a man who was similarly silent? To be forever learning, at least as it is modelled by Reacher, is not forever sharpening knives, and refining an analytic or methodological apparatus; but rather, to be prepared to cut, to make the decisive incision when necessary. Or, in Reacher's case, serve as judge, jury and executioner. This assessment, then, has helped us discover that the Jack Reacher's style of leadership is found by playing in the middle of the action, but when called on, to take direct and definitive action. How, dear reader, would you answer the question?

CODA

Jackson and Parry's *Very Short* text (2008) encouraged us to attend to the ancient traditions because, as they argue, 'in truth, not that much has changed [in leadership studies and practice] despite what the hype suggests' (p. 118). Here, we have sought to do as much by locating Lee Child's *Night School* in the long line of ancient approaches to leadership instruction such as the statesmen or princely manuals that, arguably, present a continuous tradition from the time of Isocrates to the 20th century. In a roundabout fashion, *Night School* belongs to (or, at the very least, can be examined in light of) that tradition. Like an ancient statesman manual, *Night School* is a teaching device in the form of a book.

To conclude, there are three extra-textual lessons come into view when we step back and consider the accomplishments of Lee Child, and what we have potentially uncovered in our narrative. The first supplementary lesson is that leadership (and management) instruction need not be overtly theoretical or expressed in an overly complex language. Child can be celebrated for having modelled a mode of instruction that is orientated towards whole-sale improvement via bottom-up education (a nonelitist page-turning paperback) aimed at the middle.

Child's poetic writing, pointillistic sentences and fast-paced narratives appeal to a wide range of readers, including literary scholars, though, as Martin (2015) notes, these intellectuals are more closet admirers than overt groupies. Men and women alike are fans (Barber, 2017) and these traverse many geographical boundaries. This alone should attract our attention; yet beyond popularity, there are riches to be found in Child's work that inform and challenge social and business norms.

Secondly, Lee Child reminds us that the artist is the ultimate leader. Grint (2000) concurs, arguing that the fine, martial and performing arts all help us access leadership as a 'constructed identity' (p. 6), which opens space for a rich enquiry into the work of leading. Traditionally, the public, or leadership academic for that matter, appears to flounder in disbelief at the prospect that an artist might be a serious intelligence. The artist, it is assumed, is merely an unwitting agent or accidental intermediary. This belief in the unintentional displays of erudition by an artist *must* be sustained so that the academic, scholar or critic might steal their insights or understandings with a clear conscience. Here, by contrast, we have taken the opposite tact and turned (and returned) attention to the text itself, and the overabundance of insights and understandings *Night School* communicates. The future of leadership studies may yet do the same and wholeheartedly embrace the artistry of leading, using Lee Child as a seminal exemplar.

⁹The phrase 'Reacher said nothing' is a recurring motif through many of the Child novels and is immortalized on the sundial at Lee Child's Sussex house in the UK, as NIL DIXIT ADEPTUS (Martin, 2015: 168).

The third and final supplementary lesson is that even the banal and common place, such as a top-selling novel, can be transmuted into a top-level leadership instructional text offering guidance on navigating the managerial and organizational labyrinths. Furthermore, we would argue along with Guillet de Monthoux and Czarniawska-Joerges (1994) that novels like Child's are perhaps more authentic renderings of organizational life and leadership, than the conventional texts sitting alongside them in the same bookshelves.

While we have learned much from 'Professor' Jack Reacher, and our reflections in this essay are samples from the rich curriculum on offer at his 'Academy', the last word belongs to Professor Ken Parry. The reason we wrote this piece is that Parry, like Reacher, was a questor, a truth-seeker trying to make sense of the complex constructs that constitute the world of leadership. We found in Reacher a man who stands outside the theoretical and tribal constraints of the novel's interlocutors. Ken Parry was similarly unbounded, a quality we find in his preferences for a grounded approach to leadership research.

We also find Reacher and Parry similar to the extent that they challenge 'mainstream' thinking. Parry (1998), in his quest to understand leadership appropriate for this age, wrote stridently about the weaknesses within mainstream leadership studies. By grounding his work in the present and in what is evident at the moment, Parry's grounded theory approach offers a similar though not identical set of learnings that we found at the Jack Reacher Academy. Disembodied, ungrounded and unduly abstract constructs and theories do little to help leaders – scholars and practitioners – to know and interpret presenting data. Parry understood leadership as a process; and that researching leadership required a similar processual turn. It makes sense, therefore, that a distrust of authority and documents, along with a flexibility to determine the spirit and intent behind documents and behaviours, would be as much part of Parry's toolkit as Reacher's.

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