Nobody Does It Better: Ian Fleming’s James Bond Turns Sixty

Guy F. Burnett

Published online: 25 February 2014
© Springer Science+Business Media New York 2014

Abstract Most of the world knows Ian Fleming’s fictional character James Bond through the 12 novels, 2 collections of short stories, and 23 films over the past 50 years which have been made of him. However, very few realize that the character began 60 years ago as a pulp hero standing up for Western values against a morally corrupt, vindictive, and spreading communist empire. Ian Fleming created a hero that embodied the West and its ideals of individualism, perseverance, and greatness, and in order to understand the popularity of James Bond, one must understand just what the character represents to the world. In this concise article, a textual and philosophic consideration of the character of James Bond is undertaken by examining Fleming’s original novels, stories, and writings on the subject. It becomes apparent that Fleming’s creation was to stand strongly opposed to the collectivist Soviet Union and its values, as well as be a tribute to Western spies who sacrifice their own happiness in the name of protecting democracy. The continued popularity of James Bond is found in the idea that the character represents the West against those who seek to destroy it and its values.

As an author, Ian Fleming had many high-profile admirers. Among them were the late president John F. Kennedy, Jr., British poet and playwright Somerset Maugham, and American author Raymond Chandler. In 1958, close friends Fleming and Chandler agreed to meet for a few drinks and discuss their writing. At one point during the interview, Fleming admitted, “I never intended my leading character, James Bond, to be a hero. I intended him to be a sort of blunt instrument wielded by a government department….” But of course he’s always referred to as my hero. I don’t see him as a hero myself.” Chandler, a fan of Fleming’s secret agent, quickly shot back, “You ought to.”

Most of the world knows Fleming’s popular superspy through the 23 films of him made over the past 50 years. The latest film, Skyfall, showed that the Bond franchise is still popular worldwide, grossing more than $1 billion dollars and becoming the eighth-highest-grossing film in history. Millions continue to watch and root for the British spy, but very few know about his modest start as a pulp hero standing up for the West against a morally corrupt and spreading communist empire. The year 2013 marked the sixtieth anniversary of the publication of the first Bond novel Casino Royale. Writing from his small Jamaican bungalow at the height of the Cold War, Fleming created a hero that gave hope to the West. Bond is more than a serialized action hero, and even though the threat of an expanding Soviet Union has been gone for more than 20 years, Fleming’s hero still has a lot to say about the strength of the West and the people who believe in it.

Thwarting Communism

In Fleming’s novels (twelve in all, including two collections of short stories), James Bond is conceived of as a foil to the spreading communist threat of the 20th century. Speaking about the collective power of communism and its faithful, Whittaker Chambers wrote, “Their power, whose nature baffles the rest of the world…is the power to hold convictions and to act on them….Communists are that part of mankind which has recovered the power to live or die – to bear witness – for its faith.” In the 1950s, the Soviet Empire was at the height of its power and its spies had infiltrated all major governments around the globe. Department of State official Alger Hiss had been shown to be part of the worldwide network, atomic spies Julius and Ethel Rosenberg were exposed as NKVD operatives, the Cambridge Five had infiltrated the British Secret Service, and the House Un-American Activities Committee was kept busy with scores of high-level espionage accusations.
The global network of communists and socialist sympathizers was a foe to match the West—and was growing in size and power each year.

It was during this time that Fleming sat down to write his “spy novel to end all spy novels.” Having covered a show trial in the USSR as a reporter early in his career as well as having worked in the intelligence section of the Royal Navy in the Second World War, Fleming firmly believed in the devastating threat of communist agents and provocateurs. He knew the movement would never cease of its own accord, and that unless the West took it seriously, it would lose the Cold War. After returning from an assignment in 1939, he wrote about the Soviets, “when the moment comes for action [the British and French] will realize that these tough grey-faced little men...are a vastly different force from the ill-equipped gun fodder of 1914.”

Casino Royale emerged as Fleming’s answer to the communist spy threat of the 1950s. British Secret Service Agent James Bond (codename “007”)—a completely fabricated numerical system created by Fleming—represented the power of Western individuality against an enemy sworn to the doctrine of collectivism. In the novels, Bond is a resourceful man who, through an unwavering belief in himself and his mission, can overcome all of the evil minds and dastardly plans of a ruthless and growing collectivist empire. Fleming’s novels aimed to give hope and a sense of pride to the Western way of life at a time when nothing was settled.

In Casino Royale, Bond is given the assignment of taking down a French communist by bankrupting him at a game of baccarat in a decadent casino in northern France. Bond plays the game of his life, and Fleming’s prose drips with intensity as each of the cards is played and glances are exchanged. Immediately following the game, communist forces begin to converge, and Bond, with his new girlfriend Vesper Lynd in tow, must rely on his wits to outsmart and outplay the enemy. The whole gamut of human emotion is thrust at Bond as he attempts to escape, climaxing with a scene of brutal torture where Bond is saved only by a mysterious double agent. Recovering in the hospital, he begins to speak to his friend and allied French agent, Rene Mathis. Bond explains that he wants to quit the spy game because the truth of the world has revealed itself to him. He explains that all governments, spies, and wars are relative. Where a person was born and raised was the only meaningful reason to swear allegiance to any nation or ideology. Bond believes he has figured it out, and his running around fighting the evil empire was hollow and simply a matter of circumstance. There was no right or wrong in the world, nor good and evil—natural rights and higher laws were simply moralistic devices invented by governments to induce subservience.

Fleming wrote this dialogue as a reflection on the current state of apathy the West was experiencing in the face of a zealously indoctrinated enemy. At the time of Casino Royale, seductive Marxist teachings were beginning to sway people in universities and government. The seduction was powerful: if God did not exist, and man was in charge of the world, man was free to change the world as he saw fit, including the destruction of class, wealth, and, as necessary for progress, individual natural rights. The communists believed the hype, and the world began to be shaped by their ruthless and unwavering dedication to the idea. Part of their dedication stemmed from relativism. Marxist doctrine holds that the entire world is simply shaped by environment and society, and that no real or legitimate truths exist—only man-made ideas.

In the final chapter of the novel, Bond begins to rethink his relativism after he realizes the brutal nature of his enemy. The love of his life, Vesper Lynd, is exposed as a double agent who had been trying to escape the Russian counterintelligence service SMERSH (from the Russian “smert shpiyonam!”—“death to spies!”), and she commits suicide, leaving Bond only a small explanatory note. Learning that she was about to be captured, tortured, and murdered by an agent who had trailed them for days, Bond suddenly grows cold. His previous relativism and its ideas are all abandoned, along with his impulses toward mollification and forgiveness of the Soviet government. In its place, Bond grows a coldness, a vengefulness, and an understanding of communism and the Soviet system:

…”– It was not too late. Here was a target for him, right to hand. He would take on SMERSH and hunt it down. Without SMERSH, without this cold weapon of death and revenge, the MWD [Soviet Ministry of State Security] would be just another bunch of civil servant spies, no better and no worse than any of the western services. SMERSH was the spur. Be faithful, spy well, or you die. Inevitably and without any question, you will be hunted down and killed. It was the same with the whole Russian machine. Fear was the impulse. For them it was always safer to advance than to retreat. Advance against the enemy and the bullet might miss you. Retreat, evade, betray, and the bullet would never miss. But now he would attack the arm that held the whip and the gun. The business of espionage could be left to the white-collar boys. They could spy, and catch the spies. He would go after the threat behind the spies, the threat that made them spy.

It was at the end of Casino Royale that James Bond, the West’s vengeful hand against world communism, was born. He vowed to fight the Red Machine to save the world from the evils perpetrated by a Marxist system.

As a writer, Fleming was far from perfect in his research. We now know that SMERSH, Bond’s Soviet spy nemesis, existed only during the Second World War, and its duties were primarily to find spies within the Red Army. In 1946,
SMERSH was officially disbanded, and the agency’s duties were absorbed into the MGB (the forerunner of the KGB). Although Fleming got the agency wrong, SMERSH was simply his representation of the nature of Soviet intelligence, which he understood intimately. The Soviets are often the enemy perpetrating the most heinous crimes against humanity in Fleming’s novels. At one point, he introduced an invented terrorist organization called SPECTRE, which is much more hollow and contrived, as the enemy of James Bond. In an interview with *Playboy Magazine* published in 1964, Fleming said he had given the Russians a break because in the real world a summit was scheduled to take place between the West and the Soviet Union and he wanted to be a little nicer to them in case they came around. However, he candidly noted, “if they go on squeezing off cyanide pistols in people’s faces, I may have to make them cosa mia again.” Apparently by the final two novels (*You Only Live Twice* and *The Man with the Golden Gun*) the Soviets had angered him enough to once again be brought back into Bond’s sights. Before his assignment in *The Man with the Golden Gun*, his avuncular boss known only as “M” tells him, “If the Russians are so keen on peace, what do they need the KGB for? At the last estimate, that was about 100,000 men and women ‘making war’ as you call it against us and other countries.” Bond remains quiet, but “the old fierce hatred of the KGB and all its works had been reborn in him.”

A Medal for Those Who Never Get Them

One of the most prominent themes running throughout Fleming’s novels is his commentary on life in the espionage trade. Even though Bond is a romanticized and over-the-top portrayal of the life of a spy, he is still imbued with intense feelings and deep emotions. Recalling his friendships with actual spies, Fleming said, “I’ve known quite a lot of them, and on the whole they’re very quiet, peace-loving people whom you might meet in the street, sit next to them in your club...it’s a dull job and they get no thanks for it and they get no medals.” Bond is Fleming’s tribute to the spies who go unheralded for the thankless and often terrible work they do.

Most of the Cold War was fought under the cloak of covert actions and clandestine affairs. James Bond is the underground’s hero brought to light, and his difficulties reflect his humanity. He is never completely thrilled about his work, but he knows it must go on until the bitter end. Of course Bond always wins the day and gets the girl, but Fleming is deeper than that. He never forgets to show the real emotions that spies must deal with in their line of work, and he never forgets to show his hero suffering. As such, Bond’s perseverance in the face of his troubles became an example for the West to look towards. He became the self-sacrificing hero and soldier every good democrat wanted defending the republic. Raymond Chandler put it more succinctly: “James Bond is what every man would like to be, and what every woman would like between her sheets.” The life of Fleming’s spy is never easy, but he always gets the job done.

One of the most odious parts of being a covert operative is the personal killing involved. Death is part of the job, and although the Soviet Union was despised for its ruthless killing, the West was forced to engage in it too – albeit on a much smaller scale. Bond is given a license to kill, but he is never completely comfortable with it. In *Goldfinger*, Bond is preparing to kill a group of armed guards in order to reach his objective. Feeling conflicted, he tries to justify his upcoming kill by imagining their own evil pasts. However, he quickly gives up his mental exercise and comes to terms with the nature of his job: “[T]here was no point in trying to ease his conscience. It was kill or be killed. He must just do it efficiently.”

As an author, Fleming had a sympathy for those called by their governments to carry out assassinations and undesirable actions. Bond is not immune from the pain of guilt and regret. Fleming once remarked, “you’ve got to have a lot of nerve for that sort of thing, and whatever it is that enables a good killer to function also seems to defeat him in the end. The killer’s spirit begins to fail, he gets the seed of death within himself.” Even Bond begins to crack under the pressure in several of the stories. In “The Living Daylights,” Bond, the best shot in the Secret Service, is on assignment to assassinate an enemy sniper near the Berlin Wall. His contact on location is envious of how romantic the job of a spy is. After a moment of introspection, Bond bluntly tells his contact, “Look, my friend….I’ve got to commit a murder tonight. Not you….Think I like this job? Having a Double-O number and so on? I’d be quite happy for you to get me sacked from the Double-O section. Then I could settle down and make a snug nest of papers as an ordinary Staffer. Right?” Bond realizes the necessity of killing, just as the West did while it was fighting the Cold War, but he never enjoys this part of the job.

Aside from the killing, women have always played a major role in the life of Fleming’s hero. The role of women in the Bond novels has been interpreted (and misinterpreted) to show that Fleming was a rabid misogynist who sought vengeance on women. Critics of the films have often decried the character of Bond as misogynist just like Fleming, but the critique is simply not true, and the books tell a very different story. Fleming was a notoriously enigmatic figure with the women in his life, including his own wife, and Bond is much the same way. However, like Fleming, Bond is not without real emotion and attachment to the girls he meets. In *Diamonds Are Forever*, Bond is asked to seduce a woman in order to obtain her help. He silently laments this part of the job, but resolves not to be cruel: “It was his job to use her, but, whatever the job dictated, there was one way he would never ‘use’ this particular girl. Through the heart.” A femme fatale is in each of the stories, and Bond always manages to love and protect his leading lady until the end. For the critics of Bond as
a chauvinist, it’s helpful to remember that the Soviet Union was much more aggressive in their use of forced seduction and female spies (called “swallows”), and employed it, often against the spy’s will, on a scale much larger than the West would ever have permitted. In fact, the entire plot of From Russia, with Love can be seen as Fleming’s critique on the Soviet practice of exploiting women in the world of espionage.

Precisely because of his job, Bond cannot have one of the most enduring values of the West: a family. Bond recognizes his job is full of exotic intrigue and adventure, but it’s hollow compared to the ubiquitous human emotions of love, betrayal, tragedy, and forgiveness. In one of the most uncharacteristic and fascinating of the Bond stories, “Quantum of Solace,” Fleming reminded his readers of the adventure of a seemingly normal life. In the story, Bond has recently finished his assignment to destroy a shipment of arms on its way to Cuban communist leader Fidel Castro. Briefly relaxing in Nassau, Bond dines with a colonial governor at a formal dinner party. Smugly sizing up his own work against that of the boring civil servants and their wives around the table, Bond believes he has the most exciting job of all. After the guests leave, Bond and the governor remain alone and the governor begins to recount a story about one of the guests. The quaint story is a simple and tragic love affair full of intensity and emotion. When the story ends, Bond is at a loss for words. He ruminates over what he thought was his exciting life:

Suddenly the violent dramatics of his own life seemed very hollow. The affair of the Castro rebels and the burned out yachts was the stuff of an adventure-strip in a cheap newspaper. He had sat next to a dull woman at a dull dinner party and a chance remark had opened for him the book of real violence – of the Comedie Humaine where human passions are raw and real, where Fate plays a more authentic game than any Secret Service conspiracy devised by Governments.

The life of an espionage agent was still largely romantic - but Fleming let us know that our own lives are even more intensely dramatic and adventurous. Bond recognizes that when it comes to the real business of life, he is completely underprepared. Faced with a personal question in For Your Eyes Only, Bond realizes the limits of his job: “He had not got a wife or children – had never suffered the tragedy of a personal loss. He had not had to stand up to blindness or a mortal disease. He had absolutely no idea how he would face these things that needed so much more toughness than he had ever had to show.” Fleming reminded us that we would never completely understand the lives of those in the secret service, but that our own individual lives are every bit as exciting as anything James Bond does. However, he also reminded us that the life of a spy is something to be revered because it is full of personal sacrifice and little reward.

**The Nelson Touch**

Democracy has always celebrated the endless potential of a single human being to achieve greatness. Especially in the West, lessons are still taught that individuals, not just a community, can rise up and do great things. Although Bond did not grow up a pauper, he was faced with trials and troubles from an early age. As the story goes, Bond was born to a Scottish merchant father and a Swiss mother who died in a climbing accident while he was still a young boy. He received his early education in the highest schools, all outside of Britain, and then returned home to live with his aunt where he spent several years attending Eton. According to Fleming’s novels, he was handsome, athletic, and popular with women (including an episode with a maid at Eton whereupon he was removed from the school before graduating). His temperament was always that of a lone and introspective individual, which becomes perfectly suited to his life as a spy.

His impetuous individualism and disregard for authority often led Bond to fight with his superiors, but in his obituary written by M in You Only Live Twice, he is referred to as having “The Nelson Touch.” In much the same way as England’s foremost hero, Lord Admiral Horatio Nelson, Bond was able to fight his way out of a jam and win the day for Queen and country. The connection between Bond and Nelson is not to be understated, as both men came from difficult beginnings, both chafed under authority, both were facing a greater and better-equipped foe, and both still managed to save Britain and the West. Bond is the update of this specifically British hero in a world fighting the Soviet Union. In the novels, the Soviet spy network is far better equipped than the British Secret Service, and much of that has been proven factual. Russia was always known for its vast spy network, and its numbers and resources were never higher than at the peak of the Cold War. In From Russia, with Love: “He [Bond] reflected briefly on the way the Russians ran their centres – with all the money and equipment in the world, while the Secret Service put against them a handful of adventurous, underpaid men….Perhaps, after all, the right man was better than the right machine.”

Britain in the 1950s was waning as an empire; its colonies were slipping away, and so was its world influence. Fleming seemed to be coming to grips with the decline of the British Empire and the rise of the Soviet Empire. In You Only Live Twice, Bond is having dinner with his Japanese contact, Tiger Tanaka, and the conversation drifts towards world politics. During the conversation, Bond is surprised to hear his contact speaking so frankly and disconcertingly about Britain:

You have not only lost a great Empire, you have seemed almost anxious to throw it away with both hands…Further, your governments have shown themselves successively incapable of ruling and have handed over effective
control of the country to the trade unions, who appear to be dedicated to the principle of doing less and less work for more money. This feather-bedding, this shirking of an honest day’s work, is sapping at an ever-increasing speed the moral fibre of the British, a quality the world once so admired. In its place we now see a vacuous, aimless horde of seekers-after pleasure – gambling at the pools and bingo, whining at the weather and the declining fortunes of the country, and wallowing nostalgically in gossip about the doings of the Royal Family and your so-called aristocracy in the pages of the most debased newspapers in the world.

Bond angrily shoots back:

Let me tell you this, my fine friend. England may have been bled pretty thin by a couple of World Wars, our Welfare State politics may have made us expect too much for free, and the liberation of our Colonies may have gone too fast, but we still climb Everest and beat plenty of the world at plenty of sports and win Nobel Prizes. Our politicians may be a feather pated bunch, and I expect yours are too. All politicians are. But there’s nothing wrong with the British people – although there are only fifty million of them.

Bond’s pugnacious reply shows that Fleming believed the individual desire for greatness in Britain still remained strong, and it was precisely in heroes like James Bond where it could still find hope.

One of the delicious ironies of both Fleming and Bond is that although they loved Britain, they never wholly felt at home there. Fleming was constantly working on his novels in Jamaica, and he often traveled throughout Europe and the United States. Bond is most comfortable outside of England, and he thinks in Moonraker, “there was something alien and un-English about himself. He knew that he was a difficult man to cover up. Particularly in England. He shrugged his shoulders. Abroad was what mattered. He would never have a job to do in England. Outside the jurisdiction of the Service.” Dedicated to England, he was a man at home in the world outside of it, on the front lines of the secret war against the communists.

In the final novel, The Man with the Golden Gun, Fleming fittingly has the British government offer Bond the highest award available: a knighthood. This is no doubt a personal tribute to Fleming’s own creation (whom he began to think of as a hero), but also a personal tribute to the men and women in the real world employed in the thankless and dangerous work of spying. While recovering in a local hospital in the Caribbean at the end of the novel, Bond begins to think about what the award would mean when he returned home. In the end, he refuses the award and cables M the following telegram: “I am a Scottish peasant and will always feel at home being a Scottish peasant and I know comma sir comma that you will understand my preference.” Bond refers to himself only as a simple Scottish peasant, and wishes to remain one. He has spent his life defending Britain and the West and that is enough.

Success in a Time of War

Ian Fleming’s books were a moderate success in Britain and America in the 1950s. The smashing success Fleming felt the books deserved did not come until later in 1961, when Life Magazine published an article on newly-elected President John F. Kennedy, Jr.’s top ten favorite books. Fleming’s novel, From Russia, With Love, ranked ninth on the list. The article launched Fleming and James Bond into the mainstream. Between 1960 and 1964, the author’s earnings increased tenfold, and high-profile studios and producers began to get several big budget films ready for production. Tragically, Fleming succumbed to a heart attack in 1964 and died shortly before the second film, From Russia, with Love, was released. Working on the Bond novels until his death, he had recently published You Only Live Twice. The final novel, The Man with the Golden Gun, as well as a collection of short stories grouped under the title Octopussy, were published posthumously. Several biographies have been released about Fleming, including a four-part miniseries in early 2014. A testament to his popularity, it is entitled Fleming: The Man Who Would Be Bond.

Whittaker Chambers believed he was moving from the winning to the losing side when he defected from communism. He believed the solidarity behind the Soviet Union and the adherents of Marx would ultimately prevail over a decadent and increasingly faithless West. Fleming’s novels gave the West hope and faith at a time when the Soviet Union seemed to be winning the Cold War. He created a new hero for the friends of democracy and freedom. Even though the Cold War ended more than two decades ago, Bond’s popularity continues because he is still seen as a lone Western warrior against the tide of oppression and terror that continues to swell throughout the world. Democracies will always need their heroes, and Fleming’s superspy is poised to fill that role for decades to come.

Guy F. Burnett is an assistant professor of political science at the University of Alaska Anchorage, where he teaches Constitutional Law, American Government, and Political Philosophy. He has written for the Clarendon Review of Books, Political Behavior, City Journal, and is working on a book surrounding property rights and the infamous “Kelo v. New London” decision.
The 007 Dossier has the best magazine articles, interviews, photos and videos - old and new - from around the world, and it’s all FREE! If you have enjoyed this publication, please visit www.the007Dossier.com to find many more.

JUST LOOK WHAT YOU’VE MISSED.

LIFE & STYLE
THE ART OF LOVING

SEX ISSUE
Nuestras chicas Bond

© 2013 The007Dossier.com. All rights reserved. James Bond 007 is a registered trademark of MGM Inc. A division of the United Artists Corporation and EON Productions Limited. All rights reserved.