

# HEROES ARE FOREVER: THE JAMES BOND THRILLERS

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Thrillers are a simplified version of Romantic literature. They are not concerned with a delineation of values, but, taking certain values for granted, they are concerned with only one aspect of a moral being's existence: the struggle of good against evil in terms of purposeful action - a dramatized abstraction of the basic pattern of: choice, goal, conflict, danger, struggle, victory.

Ayn Rand, *The Romantic Manifesto*<sup>1</sup>

The spy novel is a good example of what the American writer and philosopher Ayn Rand called "bootleg romanticism". This fiction communicates life-affirming themes of heroism and personal struggle in a simplified and often entertaining way. Like the illegal drink trade in Prohibition America, this fiction was the result of hostility from the cultural mainstream.

Such "bootleg" novels are not always perfect, of course, although some can be very inspiring and fun to read too. If the purpose of good art is to enhance life and hold up a picture of heroic action, then the thriller can serve this end as well as more "serious" work.

The key to the thriller is the hero. Although this is a generalisation, the heroic theme is the result of an individualistic method. Not all thriller writers are libertarians, but their work is generally based on a view of man as the controller of his own life.

The artistic expression of heroism needs to be repeated and conveyed in a colourful, enjoyable way in a healthy society. Not everyone wants to read long and learned books on political theory, even if they have the time. The advantage of well crafted thrillers is that they say a lot very quickly.

Heroic values were gradually driven out of 'serious' literature towards the end of the last century. The Romantic movement in the West, dominated by great luminaries like Victor Hugo, was displaced by the Naturalistic school. These writers - Ernest Hemingway for example - adopted the method of journalistic reporting and simply recorded life, at the expense of plot, drama, and above all, the idea of individuals possessing volition.

The idea of man as the controller of his own life was replaced by that of man as essentially a *victim*. This explains why so much of this fiction was unsatisfying. No-one really does anything. The novels of manners, for example, with their inconsequential themes and even vaguer plots, were the result of an anti-volition approach to literature, in turn the result of collectivist, even nihilist, ideas.

The public demand for 'romantic' themes in fiction did not die out, however. It bubbled up to the surface in 'bootleg' forms, rather like the bootleg whisky sold in Chicago speakeasies. The public showed a large appetite for heroic themes in the thriller novels and spy books made popular this century. In particular, they loved the James Bond novels of Ian Fleming.

## THE MOST POPULAR FICTIONAL CHARACTER IN MODERN PUBLISHING HISTORY

Before discussing the books, it is worth knowing a little about the author.<sup>2</sup> Ian Lancaster Fleming was a fascinating, somewhat eccentric figure who came from a wealthy Scottish family and was educated at Eton. He later worked for the Reuters news agency and covered a notorious show trial in Russia during the early 1930s. This was to remain one of his most important experiences. However, the most seminal period in his life came during the war, when he worked in Naval Intelligence, discovering the dark world of espionage and intrigue on the fringes of the war effort.

007 made his first appearance in *Casino Royale*, a taut tale of how Bond smashes a Communist network in France by taking an agent's cash in a high game of baccarat in a smart casino. This book and its immediate successors did not make an instant impact and Fleming could hardly have imagined the huge success of the books after his sad death in 1964.

The novels have since sold around the world in millions. The spy can justly claim to be the most popular fictional character in modern publishing history. This was due to Fleming's great skill as a writer, and later, to the stunning success of the films.

## MORAL SERIOUSNESS

What is the great strength of the novels? I believe it is Bond's basic *heroism*. The books are exhilarating tales because they reject the anti-volitionism and fatalism of so much 'serious' literature. There are no pathetic little spies of hardly any moral centre and self respect in Bond's world. There is instead a stylised picture of evil villains, exotic locations and 007 himself - tough, resourceful, self-possessed and ultimately victorious.

He is a serious figure, as all heroes basically are, but not a humourless cad. He takes his difficult job seriously, does it well and clearly believes in what he does. Despite moments of self-doubt he does not deny the basic moral rightness of fighting and destroying the bad guys.

Moral arguments and great themes are not usually spelt out, because the values are contained in the action itself. The plots are particularly important for this reason. The well crafted plot is a key element of fiction, because without it the hero is unable to show his ability to exercise volition and make difficult choices in a number of different situations. Fleming was a master at creating a coherent, almost predictable sequence: the enemy scheme (for example, nuclear blackmail); Bond's briefing by his crusty old boss M; Bond's adventure; confrontation with the villain (the likes of Goldfinger or Doctor No); struggle; suffering of Bond; victory.

The coherent plot sequences are also effective thanks to the terrific pace of the novels, produced by the way Fleming wrote at high speed. What one notices is the tremendous zest for life in characters, which was transferred from Fleming himself.

Yet although moral issues are mostly contained and assumed in the action, there are exceptions. Bond openly talks about good and evil in *Casino Royale*, considered by Raymond Chandler to be Fleming's best book.

This vein of moral seriousness tends to be ignored by critics, some of whom regard the Bond books as amoral. Yet behind the sophisticated facade is a clear cut drama as old as St George and the Dragon.

## LOVE OF LIFE AND OF DETAIL

Yet despite this seriousness, there is no cold bath asceticism in Bond's character. What Anthony Burgess called the "Renaissance

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gusto” of the novels largely rejects the austerity of the immediate post-war period.

In a way, the thrillers are an unashamed celebration of the luxury and fun made possible by capitalism. Fleming wrote in the fifties and early sixties when the masses were starting to enjoy rising living standards and the chance of foreign travel. If they could not get such things immediately they were quite happy to enjoy them vicariously through the Bond books and movies.

Bond, of course, is an unashamed lover of good living, although his strange world is full of extremity and he has to endure hardship too. He likes fast cars, fine wine and of course, beautiful women. His consumption of powerful cigarettes and vodka martinis certainly sets him at odds with the health conscious puritans of today. Yet this love of life is disciplined. Bond was, like his creator, something of a contradiction, part funlover and part puritan.

This mixture of the flamboyant and tough can be seen in the novels. Take *Moonraker*, for example. It begins when Bond and M meet Hugo Drax in a smart gambling club called Blades, the food, scenery and sheer opulence of which is superbly described. (Gambling plays an important part in all the novels.) Bond later discovers that Drax is a megalomaniac ex-Nazi who is trying to blow up London. He must endure extreme pain in his bid to foil a missile launch. (He succeeds, of course.) To repeat an earlier point, moral issues are contained in the action. The sharp swings from luxury to pain are mirror images of the fight Bond wages against evil.

There are other praiseworthy features of the thrillers. Fleming writes extremely well. His general prose style - terse, pacy, communicating great excitement and tension - is excellent, and I would encourage any budding writer to study him. There is a hidden depth to the novels, and they contain all kinds of arcane and fascinating information, not just about weird gadgets. This all contributes to that peculiar style Fleming makes his trademark. His descriptive powers are superb and his eye for detail is good: consider, for example, the golf match with Goldfinger or the sketch of Harlem in *Live And Let Die*. He loved to describe a face, scene or building exactly. This “descriptive lust”, to quote Burgess, is part of the Romantic method - selecting the larger-than-life features of existence.

This larger-than-life aspect of the books has led to the predictable criticism that the books are unrealistic and therefore unserious. But in fact it conveys moral issues in a powerful way that would get lost in a more ‘realistic’ approach. We should not forget, of course, that the primary purpose of art is to enhance life, not merely reflect it.

Fleming is also peerless at creating an odd, menacing atmosphere when something nasty is concealed behind an innocent seeming facade. There are numerous examples, one of the best being the gambling scene in *Casino Royale*. But the heroic nature of Bond means that he is never crushed by this menace. He remains a confident, choice making individual.

### THE LATER FILMS ARE A MOCKERY

Some libertarian readers may be surprised at what I have said so far. What about the sadism, sex and snobbery? And of course, Bond is a State worker in a singularly murderous profession. Hardly a paragon of libertarian virtue, surely?

Many of these seemingly damning points are the fault of the films, particularly the movies of Roger Moore. (I think the early Sean Connery films can be exempted to a degree although there are not perfect.<sup>3</sup>) It is no exaggeration to say that the later films are a mockery of what Ian Fleming created. The screenwriters and producers clearly believed that Fleming had produced a cold, humourless product, which needed a spot of jokiness if it was to sell well on screen. As a result they attacked the heroic core of Bond’s character with tongue-in-cheek humour. This was laughing at heroism and at heroic values. It is interesting that after the dreadful low-point of Roger Moore, this has been recognised to some extent in the recent films of Timothy Dalton, who seems to be following the original spirit of the books.

The sex-snobbery-sadism charge is hardly fair. Sexual encounters are described with some restraint and are tantalising for that very reason. Bond’s attitudes towards women are a little dated but he

treats them with surprising chivalry. They are certainly not animated centrefolds, as in the movies. The snobbery charge is, I suspect, the consequence of the killjoy puritanism of the critics. Sadism is also unfair. The books are violent in parts but the violence is used to convey the basic evil of Bond’s adversaries.

As for Bond’s status as a Government employee, it must be confessed that there is a powerful patriotic streak in the books which may repel some. But no real-life spy would enjoy such real freedom on the job. The fictional secret service Fleming devised was a world apart from the bureaucratic and often incompetent world of MI5 and CIA.

Bond is very different, in fact, from the general picture of a civil servant, more akin to a private investigator. His State role is in the background and does not really interfere with his position as a clear-cut individual.

Of course, Ian Fleming was writing at a time when economists were predicting the slow death of free enterprise, which would be replaced by large corporations in both the public and private sector, James Bond was the fictional dream-figure of ‘organisation man’, a character who worked for the State but got his own way too.

### A BELIEVABLE TRIUMPH OVER ADVERSITY

Ian Fleming’s biographer, John Pearson, has made a more serious criticism. He felt the thrillers were limited dramatically by the lack of real depth in the characters. The books were basically fictional autobiographies by Fleming, and he had a Walter Mitty relationship with Bond. This denied any real depth to the books, he felt. He is right, up to a point. But there are real, well defined characters in the books. The famous villains - Goldfinger, Blofeld, Mister Big, Le Chiffre - exude a menace all too plausible in the age of Pol Pot and Saddam Hussein.

007 himself suffers and enjoys a whole range of emotions, and *pace* Pearson, is a believable character as a result. He experiences frustration, fear, pleasure, compassion, and much else. He is not a cold, humourless figure either. His sense of humour tends to be ironical, sardonic. And there is a quiet, sly humour in the novels themselves.

The thriller is a limited form of fiction, as the quote by Rand at the top of this essay makes clear. But within the limits I believe Fleming succeeded in creating something valuable. He did not write whole pages documenting every part of a person’s life. He did not need to. Like all good writers he had the ability and desire to select what he wanted. The Bond adventures are highly stylised in consequence, which helps explain their terrific readability.

In conclusion, I believe the thrillers of Fleming earn a well deserved place in the Pantheon of ‘bootleg’ Romantic literature in its most vigorous and exuberant form. He achieved the purpose of great art, which was to enhance life. Within the limitations of his chosen field, he produced a series of highly entertaining and tightly written works, which are still read and enjoyed around the world.

I believe their success is not just because they supply an attractive fantasy, although that has something to do with it. It is the heroism of Bond, and the way he triumphs over adversity, which is the key to explaining his enduring popularity as a fictional character.

### NOTES

The literature of spy books is voluminous. The best place to start is with the Bond adventures themselves, beginning with the first novel, *Casino Royale*, first published in 1953.

1. Rand’s book is a collection of articles written on different fields of artistic endeavour, such as novels, music, etc.. Her definition of ‘Romantic’ art was that it expressed a picture of man as the possessor of volition, as opposed to ‘Naturalism’, where man is shaped by forces beyond his control. There would seem to be parallels with the shift from liberalism to collectivism in the twentieth century.
2. See John Pearson, *The Life of Ian Fleming*, Jonathan Cape, London, 1966.
3. See Raymond Benson, *James Bond Bedside Companion*, Boxtree, London, 1984. This is an exhaustive and good guide to the books, films and whole James Bond phenomenon.

Other reading:

See the fine introduction to the latest edition of the books by Coronet, London, 1988. Anthony Burgess writes an eloquent defence of the books here.