



The Man Who Saved Britain

By

Simon Winder

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The Bookseller

'A winning blend of cultural history, biography and memoir... often laugh-out-loud funny.'

Evening Standard

'One of the oddest books I have ever read... a very funny writer, as well as an incisive one'

Introduction: Eating Old Jamaica at the Tunbridge Wells Odeon

I am ten years old, sitting in a suburban English cinema. On the screen a man with a large chin and black roll-neck sweater pushes through jungle foliage. He crouches behind a gravestone and takes out an enormous pistol. A white woman has been tied to a post and a black man dressed in animal skins is laughing crazily and wielding a massive poisonous snake. Around them hundreds of voodoo worshippers are screaming and convulsing. The man with the large chin starts shooting the black people, who are too busy rolling their eyes and waving old cutlasses to offer proper resistance.

To be honest my memory goes a bit hazy at this point. In a moment of bravado before the film I had bought a jumbo Old Jamaica, a weird 1970s chocolate bar filled with rum essence and raisins. It had struck me as a sophisticated treat, little realizing that its only target market was in fact aspirational ten-year-old boys. Anyway, the reality of feeling sick, the perception of being drunk, and the confusion of the notionally West Indian flavour of the treat and the loosely West Indian setting of the film conspired to overwhelm me. Leaving the voodoo worshippers to their fate I staggered to the toilets. Thirty years later, rum essence still

flings me back – like some reduced-to-clear Proust – to that cinema and what proved to be a transformative encounter with a man with a large chin.

Writing this is peculiarly painful. The film in question was *Live and Let Die*, and its hero, James Bond, has since that moment deeply affected my life. For me that film pushed open the Golden Doors of sex and death, revealing a world of sophistication and cruelty previously unimagined. Sheltered by a prior movie diet of such duff material as *Tales of Beatrix Potter*, a ballet film featuring a dancing frog, I suddenly had discovered a film packed with steel-clawed black giants, alligators, speedboats and girls whimpering, ‘Oh, James.’ The Two Bad Mice prancing about hitting a little plaster fish (which of course, at the time, I had absolutely loved) became overnight something thought of always but spoken of never.

I went to see *Live and Let Die* again a week later, this time spurning the siren song of the Old Jamaica: it was a flawless gem. Every scene conveyed so much – the brutal cunning of the villains, the decency and wit of Bond, the glamorous American and West Indian locations, the miraculous music. Happy years followed of reading and reading again all the Bond books, tracking down the older Bond films, preparing myself spiritually for the next one, *The Man with the Golden Gun*.

The painfulness in all this is of course that *Live and Let Die* is dreadful. In a moment of lunatic parental outreach I recently bought the DVD to watch with my own twelve- and ten-year-old sons. I had not seen the movie in many years and this planned piece of quality nurturing left me mute with grief. The film was a mean-spirited and offensive shambles, too stupid really even to be racist, too chaotic to be camp. Worse, the film was the first to feature Roger Moore – a faintly louche manikin, famous as the Saint and, with Tony Curtis (then going through one of his cyclical career low-points), one of the Persuaders. Moore was to spearhead the progressive degeneration of Bond over a further seven films. Now I can see that I encountered and fell for Bond at the precise point, 1973, when he was spiralling out of control.

And yet for many years he *had* been important – important to millions of people in all kinds of ways, a uniquely powerful, strange presence in British life since his invention by Ian Fleming in the early 1950s. Wholly oblivious, I had as a ten-year-old bumped into his most embarrassing avatar, but my entire upbringing had been in effect soaked in the world in which Bond had thrived and in which he was understood. In this time – before Bond films were ever shown on television – double bills of old ones would tour cinemas, playing to vast steaming audiences, seeing the films, like myself, over and over again almost as a religious undertaking. I was simply then the latest among whole populations of men and women (well, mainly men to be honest) who had stood in line for the Bond experience. Our school games were soaked in Bond, our talk was endlessly about the films and about the cruelty and sex in the books: Bond was a sort of currency, albeit, and quite unknown to me, one in steep decline on the open market.

This book is an attempt to get to grips with Bond’s legacy and with the worlds in which Bond *really* mattered – not to a helpless ten-year-old ding-a-ling in the early seventies but to the generation who had

fought in the Second World War and who in vast numbers read the Bond books in the 1950s and saw the Bond films in the 1960s.

I hope to explore with reasonable seriousness the trauma faced by Britain in the 1940s and after – a far smaller trauma than that of mainland Europe, but profound nonetheless and one that could have been terminal. The link between Bond's invention and his overwhelming success and the horrors faced by Britain from 1939 onwards are close and interesting. Ian Fleming, a cynical upper-class waster galvanized by and briefly endorsed by the emergency of the War, reacted to the gradual, but sometimes vertiginous, implosion of Britain when the fighting had ended by creating the Bond books. These proceeded to find their vast niche as part of a general right-wing reaction to the humiliations and failures of British life. I want to recreate some of the stifling British obsession with the Second World War, which still cannot be shaken even today, but which once permeated all aspects of life and was dominant throughout my own childhood. Toys, film, novels, memoirs about the War were everywhere, and through them strode James Bond, the secret hero who calmly carried the values of that war through a treacherous and ungrateful Cold War world.

Inevitably this book must lean heavily on a sort of ancient archaeology – here are the remains of a door post, here a possible site of cult ritual. So much has changed and so rapidly that it is hard to get right inside the original impact of the books or the films. Morals have changed, movie gun noises are much more reverberant, sex has got sexier. The Cold War has, weirdly, completely vanished, leaving behind such peculiar debris as *From Russia with Love*, a book and a film which will appear as strange to future generations as abandoned Kazakhstan rocket silos or fallout shelters.

As a memoir, this book is fragmentary and scraped together from very slightly interesting bits and bobs. My life has just not been melodramatic enough to take up more than a few pages. I had a cheerful childhood packed with affection, no specific features to incite sympathy and no adventures to speak of. As history it will anger many, filled as it is with shocking generalizations and lack of documentation. I share that anger. This book was written in large part because I want to convey, perhaps in an overdrawn form, some of the ways in which Britain has changed – and by following James Bond show some of a vanished world which he in various ways pulled together.

The eight chapters are roughly chronological, pursuing Fleming's, Britain's and Bond's lives from the 1930s to the 1970s with occasional comfort-breaks to deal with specific themes. I have tried to give just enough background on Britain and its empire to make events around and after the War intelligible. While carefully researched, this material is breathtakingly selective and loaded with no doubt facetious and callow interpretation of a kind that will have historians shrieking to heaven for vengeance. I should really emphasize that I am not a professional historian and that anyone who has devoted their life to a serious study of this period should probably see about swapping this for something else.

A further obvious point is that this is a book only about some people some of the time: for every individual concerned about Britain's international prestige or the global nuclear threat there were countless more simply getting on with their lives. It is a simile used before, but it is like Breughel's painting *The Fall of Icarus*: a shepherd stares at the clouds, a ploughman ploughs a field, a merchant ship hurries by, and down in the corner Icarus crashes – with a tiny *plroof!* of water – completely unremarked into the sea. Clearly the end of the British Empire was for very many people an unremarked and tiny *plroof* but for many others, continuously or intermittently, it was much more.

Devoted contemporary fans will be driven to distraction by this book. Going to a premiere of the last Bond film, *Die Another Day*, at the Empire Leicester Square, I had to say that I was unmoved by what happened on the screen. Tiny voices whispered that *Die Hard* did this better, that *Face/Off* did this better, that even Vin Diesel's *xXx* did this better. I'm afraid that some years back I parted from the Way and feel relieved at having done so. But Bond's later abasement should not cloud what he used to be and movies featuring John Cleese as Q and an invisible car cannot sully the immense pleasures of the books and the early films.

This then is part memoir, part history, part a meditation on being a fan/not being a fan. The little telltale phrase, though, in the last paragraph, 'going to a premiere', will of course tell you all you need to know. I am not exactly cured. Like a hopeless modern version of Goya's *The Sleep of Reason Brings Forth Monsters*, I lie slumped at my desk with disturbingly well-thumbed copies of *Diamonds are Forever* and DVDs of *Octopussy* (for God's sake) flapping about my head. But that I think still applies to British men in general – if diminishingly so – who still walk a little differently, dream certain dreams, and are somewhat comforted and sexually a little odder than would have been the case without the imagination of a man born into a very different sort of Britain.



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