

# CRAFT SKILLS: IAN FLEMING



The continuing success of the James Bond film franchise is an example of how an appeal to popular escapism and stereotyping – described by one critic as ‘sex, sadism and snobbery’ - can be effectively blended with a ‘rattling good yarn’.

**Carl Tighe**

The craft of writing is not always concerned with the creation of 'great literature' – and surprisingly, 'great literature' is not always particularly concerned with the craft of writing well or being read easily. For example, look at the opening sentence of Leo Tolstoy's great multi-volume novel *War and Peace* (1869):

'*Eh bien, mon prince*, so Genoa and Lucca are now no more than private estates of the Bonaparte family. No, I warn you - if you are not telling me that this means war, if you again allow yourself to condone all the infamies and atrocities perpetrated by that Antichrist (upon my word I believe he is Antichrist), I don't know you in future. You will no longer be a friend of mine, or my 'faithful slave', as you call yourself! But how do you do, how do you do? I see I am scaring you. Sit down and talk to me.'<sup>1</sup>

Ian Fleming, on the other hand, though he is not taken seriously by the critics or by academics, was clearly a very successful, competent and professional writer. His entry on Wikipedia reads:

Ian Lancaster Fleming (28 May 1908 – 12 August 1964) was an English author, journalist and naval intelligence officer, best known for his James Bond series of spy novels. Fleming came from a wealthy family connected to the merchant bank Robert Fleming & Co., and his father was the Member of Parliament for Henley from 1910 until his death on the Western Front in 1917. Educated at Eton, Sandhurst and the universities of Munich and Geneva, Fleming moved through a number of jobs before he started writing. While working for Britain's Naval Intelligence Division during the Second World War, Fleming was involved in planning Operation Golden Eye and in the planning and oversight of two intelligence units, 30 Assault Unit and T-Force. His wartime service and his career as a journalist provided much of the background, detail and depth of the James Bond novels. Fleming wrote his first Bond novel, *Casino Royale*, in 1952. It was a success, with three print runs to cope with the demand. Eleven Bond novels and two short-story collections followed between 1953 and 1966. The novels revolved around James Bond, an officer in the Secret Intelligence Service, commonly known as MI6. Bond was also known by his code number, 007, and was a commander in the Royal Naval Reserve. The Bond stories rank among the best-selling series of fictional books of all time, having sold over 100 million copies worldwide. Fleming also wrote the children's story *Chitty-Chitty-Bang-Bang* and two works of non-fiction. In 2008, *The Times* ranked Fleming fourteenth on its list of 'The 50 greatest British writers since 1945'. He was married to Ann Charteris, who was divorced from the second Viscount Rothermere as a result of her affair with Fleming. Fleming and Charteris had a son, Caspar. Fleming was a heavy smoker and drinker who suffered from heart disease; he died in 1964, aged 56, from a heart attack. Two of his James Bond books were published posthumously, and others have since produced Bond

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<sup>1</sup> L. Tolstoy, *War and Peace*, (vol. 1) Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1975, p.3.

novels. Fleming's creation has appeared in film twenty-five times, portrayed by seven actors.



Fleming knew a great deal about secret ops. He also knew a great deal about 'the good life'.<sup>2</sup> He moved among the very rich and privileged. Ann Charteris, who was married to Viscount Rothermere before she met and married Fleming, was daughter of Captain Hon. Guy Lawrence Charteris and Frances Lucy Tennant, and grand-daughter of Hugo Richard Charteris, 11th Earl of Wemyss. Anne Charteris' first husband, Esmond Cecil Harmsworth, 2nd Viscount Rothermere, was the millionaire owner of *The Daily Mail*. Before the Second World War, Lord Rothermere had visited Hitler several times and corresponded with him: he supported the Nazi invasion of the Sudetenland and its invasion of Czechoslovakia; he applauded Oswald Mosley and the British Union of Fascists with the headline: 'Hurrah for the Blackshirts!'

The Bond novels appeared in a time of grim post-war shortages and rationing, but they showed that if you had money you could afford to have 'taste': you could worry about the kind of cotton your hand-stitched shirts were made from, about the kind of sports car you drove, about the kind of coffee you drank at breakfast and (at a time when most people drank beer and wine was considered exotic) whether your martini was 'shaken not stirred'. For most readers the novels, and the scandal of Fleming's affair and the divorce stories were a window onto the world of the English moneyed classes: they also gave the reader the impression that they were being shown what their 'betters' knew about the real world of espionage and the developing Cold War.

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<sup>2</sup> For more about Fleming's wartime career in Military Intelligence see: Nicholas Rankin, *Ian Fleming's Commandos: the Story of 30 Assault Unit in WWII*, (London: Faber & Faber, 2011). Ian Fleming's older brother Peter Fleming was an explorer, author of several very successful travel books and Head of 'D' Division in Military Intelligence, responsible for deception operations in Southeast Asia and with planning to meet a possible Nazi invasion of Britain: P. Fleming, *Invasion 1940: An Account of German Preparations and the British Counter Measures* (London: Rupert Hart-Davies, 1957).

However, what appeals to one generation often does not appeal to the following generation and in the films, over time, the Bond character has downshifted from the snobbish and definitely up-market portrayals offered by Sean Connery and Roger Moore to the rather surly classless version offered by Daniel Craig. Although the Bond films are still massively popular, the works of Ian Fleming are hardly known to younger readers. That is a pity because if Fleming was not a great writer – and the present generation probably find his attitudes, which were typical in their day, elitist, sexist, racist and homophobic - he was at least a real craftsman. The continuing success of the James Bond films is an example of how popular escapism and stereotyping – described by one critic as ‘sex, sadism and snobbery’ - can be when blended with a ‘rattling good yarn’. It is over 60 years since the first of Ian Fleming’s James Bond novels appeared, but in September 2013 a new Bond novel was published, this time by the ‘serious novelist’ William Boyd. This is not the only example of a ‘serious writer’ taking on the work of a successful dead author: recently Sophie Hannah has written Hercule Poirot novels after Agatha Christie, Sebastian Faulks has taken on both P. G. Woodhouse and Ian Fleming and Anthony Horowitz has revived Sherlock Holmes. So perhaps it is appropriate to look again at Fleming as a writer...



Novelist William Boyd with the manuscript of his new James Bond novel

Fleming’s terse, stylish writing has been rather overshadowed by the continuing success of the films, interest in the actors who play the Bond role, the gadgets he uses to kill and the girls he seduces along the way. However, Fleming found his ‘voice’ as a writer and storyteller with his very first novel and we should not overlook the efficiency and superb organisation of these highly successful novels for the mannered cool of the films. Fleming was, above all a professional writer, delivering time after time. However, while Ian Fleming’s books were the eagerly awaited best sellers of their day, they are no longer on the bestseller list, though they still sell very well.

Although Fleming’s writing was always effective it is generally agreed that by the time he wrote *Thunderball* in 1961 he had polished his style to become a master storyteller in his chosen genre. His ability to grab his reader’s attention is clearly evident, right from the opening sentences of even his earliest novels:

The scent and smoke and sweat of a casino are nauseating at three in the morning. Then the soul-erosion produced by high gambling – a compost of

greed and fear and nervous tension – becomes unbearable and the senses awake and revolt from it. James Bond suddenly knew that he was tired.

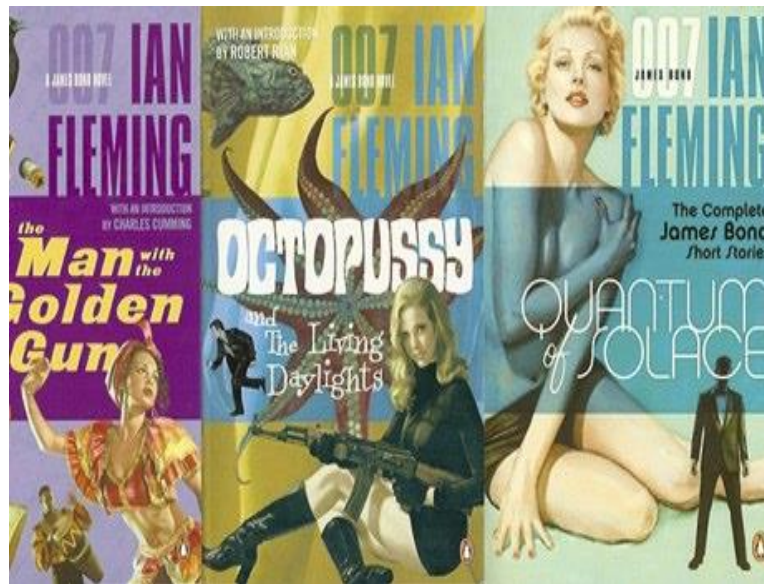
Ian Fleming, *Casino Royale* (1953)

The two thirty-eights roared simultaneously. The walls of the underground room took the crash of sound and batted it to and fro between them until there was silence. James Bond watched the smoke being sucked from each end of the room towards the central Ventaxia fan. The memory in his right hand of how he had drawn and fired with one sweep from the left made him confident.

Ian Fleming, *Moonraker* (1955)

I was running away. I was running away from England, from my childhood, from the winter, from a sequence of untidy, unattractive love-affairs, from the few sticks of furniture and jumble of overworn clothes that my London life had collected around me; and I was running away from drabness, fustiness, snobbery, the claustrophobia of close horizons and from my inability, although I am quite an attractive rat, to make headway in the rat-race. In fact I was running away from almost everything except the law.

Ian Fleming, *The Spy Who Loved Me* (1962)



Some of the lurid 1960s cover designs for James Bond books

Fleming's style is deceptively simple. He does not go in for complex grammar. For example, his use of a semi-colon in the last but one sentence stands out as unusual - but, for all its rarity, it is used effectively. Look at the passage again and as you read ask yourself - what effect does that semi-colon have, exactly?

In *Dr No* (1958) James Bond is sent to Jamaica to investigate the death of a British agent. The trail leads him to the underground base of Dr. Julius No, who unlike most humans has his heart on the right side of his body, and who is plotting to disrupt an

American manned space launch with a sophisticated radio beam weapon. In this extract from the book, secret agent James Bond, who suspects that Dr No may try to kill him before Bond's investigations can uncover the plot, wakes up to find a poisonous centipede in his bed:

The centipede had reached his knee. It was starting up his thigh. Whatever happened he mustn't move, mustn't even tremble. Bond's whole consciousness had drained down to two rows of softly creeping feet. Now they had reached his flank. God, it was turning down towards his groin! Bond set his teeth. Supposing it liked the warmth there! Supposing it tried to crawl into the crevices! Could he stand it? Supposing it chose that place to bite? Bond could feel it questing among the first hairs. It tickled. The skin on Bond's belly fluttered. There was nothing he could do to control it. But now the thing was turning up along his stomach. Its feet were gripping tighter to prevent it falling. Now it was at his heart. If it bit there, surely it would kill him. The centipede trampled steadily on through the thin hairs on Bond's tight breast up to his collar bone. It stopped. What was it doing? Bond could feel the blunt head questing slowly to and fro. What was it looking for? Was there room between his skin and the sheet for it to get through? Dare he lift the sheet an inch to help it? No. Never! The animal was at the base of his jugular. Perhaps it was intrigued by the heavy pulse there. Christ, if only he could control the pumping of his blood. Damn you! Bond tried to communicate with the centipede. It's nothing. It's not dangerous, that pulse. It means you no harm. Get on out into the fresh air!

As if the beast had heard him, it moved on up the column of the neck into the stubble on Bond's chin. Now it was at the corner of his mouth, tickling madly. On it went, up along the nose. Now he could feel its whole weight and length. Softly Bond closed his eyes. Two by two the pairs of feet, moving alternately, tramped across his right eyelid. When it got off his eye, would he take a chance and shake it off – rely on its feet slipping in his sweat? No, for God's sake! The grip of the feet was endless. He might shake one lot off, but not the rest.

With incredible deliberation the huge insect rambled across Bond's forehead. It stopped below the hair. What the hell was it doing now? Bond could feel it nuzzling at his skin. It was drinking! Drinking the beads of salt sweat. Bond was sure of it. For minutes it hardly moved. Bond felt weak with the tension. He could feel the sweat pouring off the rest of his body on to the sheet. In a second his limbs would start to tremble. He could feel it coming on. He would start to shake with an ague of fear. Could he control it, could he? Bond lay and waited, the breath coming softly through his open, snarling mouth.

The centipede stirred. Slowly it walked out of his hair and on to the pillow. Bond waited a second. Now he could hear the rows of feet picking softly at the cotton. It was a tiny scraping noise like soft fingernails.

With a crash that shook the room Bond's body jack-knifed out of bed and on to the floor.

At once Bond was on his feet and at the door. He turned on the light. He found he was shaking uncontrollably. He staggered to the bed. There it was crawling out of sight over the edge of the pillow. Bond's first instinct was to twitch

the pillow on the floor. He controlled himself, waiting for his nerves to quieten. Then softly, deliberately, he picked up the pillow by one corner and walked into the middle of the room and dropped it. The centipede came out from under the pillow. It started to snake quickly away across the matting. Now Bond was uninterested. He looked around for something to kill it with. Slowly he went and picked up a shoe and came back. The danger was past. His mind was wondering now how the centipede had got into his bed. He lifted the shoe and slowly, almost carelessly, smashed it down. He heard the crack of the hard carapace.

Bond lifted the shoe.

The centipede was whipping from side to side in its agony – five inches of grey-brown, shiny death. Bond hit it again. It burst open, yellowy.

Bond dropped the shoe and ran for the bathroom and was violently sick.



### **Follow-up Work**

How does Fleming manage to vary the pace of his prose and keep up the tension in this passage?

Generally Fleming works with short sentences of very simple construction. In this last extract there are 89 sentences; 79 are simple sentences; 4 are compound sentences; only 6 are complex sentences – that is, with more than a main and subsidiary clause.

Consider:

- In what ways does Fleming vary the pace and movement of the prose here?
- Why does Fleming favour simple statements?
- Does the subject always come at the start of the sentence?
- What parts of speech / grammar does Fleming use to start sentences?

In the third paragraph of the last extract there are 3 compound sentences. Can you identify them? How do these sentences suit the physical actions they describe?

Fleming uses very few punctuation marks apart from the full stop and the exclamation mark. Why then, in the last extract, does he place a comma after *it burst open*?

Look up the words: Carapace, Jugular, Questing, Ague, Deliberation.

The scene of the novel *Dr No* is set in the Caribbean, where Fleming owned a home and spent a great deal of his time:

- How much research do you think Fleming did for this passage?
- How much do you (or the average reader) know about centipedes?
- When Bond discovers the centipede on his leg, how does he know it is poisonous and that he must not move?
- Does Fleming actually say it is poisonous?
- Are there any dangerous centipedes in the Caribbean?
- Do they grow to five inches long?
- Are they grey-brown?
- Are they yellow inside?
- Do centipedes drink in the way Fleming described?
- Are we surprised to find that a man 'licensed to kill', and with a record of doing so, throws up at the sight of a squashed centipede?
- Look again at that final adjective – 'yellowy'. Why is it effective? Would any other colour have worked quite so well?

Comment on these descriptions of Fleming's style:

- 'He writes like the old *Daily Express* headlines and leaders.'
- 'He likes short sentences.'
- 'Often he uses one sentence paragraphs.'
- 'When Bond is in bed with a girl, some of the sentences become longer. Sometimes they even get a bit soppy. But not very.'
- 'He has written an exciting book.'

Consider Fleming as a professional writer:

- Is this great literature?
- Is it effective writing?
- What is his main aim?
- How does Fleming's writing demonstrate that he is a craftsman?
- How does Fleming's writing demonstrate that he has 'found his voice'?
- In what ways is it clear to you that Fleming is a 'professional' writer?
- In what ways is this 'professional' writing?