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Restorative Fiction in the Postwar Rebuilding of Britain: Ian Fleming's *Casino Royale* and *Dr. No*

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Abstract

After World War II, Great Britain experienced significant expansion following the devastation of war. Ian Fleming's James Bond novels were popular during this time and I argue that they had a restorative effect in helping post-war Britons rebuild their nation and look towards a future that included many of the things that had been lost or destroyed by the war. This article defines and explains the concept of *restorative fiction* and applies it to Fleming's novels *Casino Royale* (1953) and *Dr No* (1958). It compares *Casino Royale* and *Dr. No* with the so-called 'kitchen sink' dramas that were also popular, but which presented a less gritty, hopeless view of post-war Britain. While history tells us that Britain did not regain its position as a world power, the paper argues that Fleming's novels helped Britons re-imagine that world and work towards its reconstruction.

Introduction

The long decade between 1953-1964 in which Ian Fleming wrote his James Bond novels, was for Britain a time of expansion, discovery, social change and rebuilding. The nation's citizens again needed to work together and see themselves thriving in a democratic new world in which Britain regained some of its lost political, economic and military power. Literature was one important vehicle in establishing how Britons imagined themselves and their nation and

helped create the post-war British identity. [1] In the aftermath of the war, Britons needed to re-create a strong nation with strong internal relationships that would allow them to collectively move forward.

Novels, literature and other cultural products were as important during the rebuilding of Britain as physical labour, growing exports and population increase. Raymond Williams (2009, p. 32) provided a social definition of culture as 'a particular way of life, which expresses certain meanings and values not only in art and learning but also in institutions and ordinary behaviour'. This is important because it is through social institutions, societal relationships and shared behaviours that communities and nations construct meaning, identity and value. In their own way, the Bond novels re-shaped British identity and values and what it meant to be British. This article will argue that the novels showed Britons how they could take advantage of a complex democratised society dealing with both decline and transformation. The novels also encouraged Britons to believe that Britain would once again become a political, military and economic power able to lead and win without relying on America, that export trade would resume and the import of foreign goods would be restored.

This article argues that Ian Fleming's *James Bond* novels had a restorative role in Britain's rebuilding after World War II (WWII). It explores how Ian Fleming's *Casino Royale* first published in 1953 and *Dr. No* first published in 1958, was as important to the post-war restoration of Britain as the physical labour of Britons was during the period. In comparison to the 'kitchen sink dramas' of the same period which present a gritty view of working-class life where young male characters are trapped in marriage, the food is greasy and unappetising and the work is menial, dirty and relentless, the characters in Fleming's novels indulge in travel to glamorous locations that are unaffected by war, they enjoy food that has not been seen in Britain for many years and engage in sex without commitment. The paper concludes by arguing that Fleming, like other contemporary writers, used his novels to express his anxiety about the post-war social changes that were taking place in Britain including the break-up of the Empire.

Social change in post-war Britain

In *Casino Royale*, Fleming wrote:

> Do not believe what you read in books and novels about the war. There is nothing worse. It is not only the immediate agony, but also the thought that your manhood is being gradually destroyed and that at the end, if you will not yield, you will no longer be a man (1955, p. 124).

This was true for the many men and women who had endured the horrors of fighting and who returned home haunted by their experiences and broken by the atrocities of the war. They also returned home to share the austerity measures and substantial devastation and loss that the war had wrought. Large parts of London, Merseyside, Birmingham, Manchester, Plymouth, Clydeside and Southampton had been heavily bombed and destroyed. Britain had accumulated

debts of more than £3,000 million to fund their war effort, their domestic capital had fallen by the same amount and exports were below their pre-war level. Foodstuffs and building materials were rationed to support the substantial rebuilding efforts. Coal production had fallen to 175 million tons per year and this affected Britain's ability to earn export revenue and produce enough electricity for domestic consumption resulting in blackouts. Population growth had also slowed during the war and remained slow for some time afterwards (Marwick, 1990, p. 19).

A general election in 1945 brought a change of government, and with it a significant social change. Labour won 393 seats in the 606-seat lower house – a Labour landslide (Sinfield, 1989, p. 9). Labour promised full employment, a national health service, universal full-time secondary education, greater pension rights, family allowance, unemployment benefits and public housing. Sinfield (1989, p. 15) provides a concise assessment of the disruptions to the social order that followed the change of government. The low and middle classes began to enjoy the privileges that had previously only been available to the upper classes. The government provided to all Britons what we now consider basic rights – this was the beginning of a democratised society.

Rather than dwell on the deprivations they had endured, the devastation and what had been lost, Britons needed to focus on rebuilding their towns, restoring their economy, expanding their population and establish a sense of justice and fairness and regaining their position and status as a world leader. On 16 August 1945, the Prime Minister Clement Atlee said in the House of Commons there was: 'a vast demand for labour for the urgent tasks of reconstruction at home' (Wilson, 1980, p. 43)

However, the social changes that came about after the war really began well before that. According to Alan Sinfield:

> To win the war, people were encouraged to believe that there would not be a return to widespread injustice and poverty. The war exemplified (though not without contest) a pattern of state intervention and popular co-operation to organize production for a common purpose. And its successful conclusion afforded a rare opportunity to recast British society. Full employment and the welfare state created, for a while, the sense of a society moving toward fairness' (1989, p. 1)

In 1951, E. H. Carr, the English Marxist historian and journalist, said in a radio interview:

> … that Britain has done more than any other country during the last five years to mark out new lines of social and economic advance, so I believe she has had better opportunities than any other country to lay the foundations of an educated mass democracy (in Marwick, 1970, p. 5).

After the war, Britain had the opportunity and the willingness of the population to undertake the social change that was needed to restore and rebuild. The biggest change was the relationship between the different social classes, the rise of the middle class and the further encroachment into the privileges of the upper class that had begun during the 1920s and 1930s. The middle class was about to enjoy a citizenship and status that they could not have envisaged before 1939 including health services, universal secondary school education and nearly universal pension rights (Sinfield, 1989, p. 15). The dramatic social changes that became an actuality after World War 11 began in the aftermath of World War I. At the time, the benefits of the changes that were being imposed by the government were not easy to comprehend and caused considerable anxiety (Sinfield, 1989, p. 16). This is understandable, because long-held social structures were being challenged, in addition to recovering from wartime devastation. It was into this social climate that Fleming would launch his novels, a society that would be shaped by war and its consequences, bundled with the promises of a new government.

'Restorative fiction' and post-war Britain

The Bond novels can be read as part of a category of fiction that has been called 'restorative fiction'. Contemporary survivors of war and sexual abuse use restorative fiction to help with their healing. In the absence of a concise and accepted academic definition of this term, one can be constructed from its Latin root 'restaurare' which means to repair, rebuild or renew. Restorative fiction would then be defined as fiction that helps a society or community to repair, rebuild or renew after an apocalyptic event destroys familiar patterns of order and social relations. Restorative fiction is storytelling that is uplifting and that harnesses a community's strength to endure the efforts required of them to repair, rebuild and renew. Restorative fiction focuses on strength, potential, healing and growth rather than what is broken. Restorative fiction constructs a world in which order is restored.

Early examples of restorative fiction can be found during the Victorian period and aimed to overlay a world of political unrest and instability with images of productivity, the comfortable English middle class and a confident national image. Examples include the novels *North and South* (1854) and *Cranford* (1851-3) by Elizabeth Gaskell and *Adam Bede* (1959) by George Eliot. Following World War II, Ian Fleming's *James Bond*, and other restorative fiction, became important to how Britons rebuilt and re-imagined their new selves and their nation within a new global context.

Fleming's novels satisfied Britons cultural, social and political need for a shared national identity following World War II. Storey (2010, p. 17) explains that a national identify like Britishness is made up of a collection of shared and contested meanings organised around power relations. He acknowledges that this way of considering national identity involves a struggle over meaning and the way signs, to use the language of semiotics, or cultural objects can be interpreted (2010, p. 19). A single cultural object can be given different meanings by conflicting social interests. This is especially true at a time of great change and trying to make sense of that change. To understand Storey's

concept of culture and its practical application, I will examine in detail the extent to which Ian Fleming's books reflect Britons' image of themselves and the losses that needed restoration in their society.

'Restorative fiction' and the Bond novels

Fleming described his novels as 'romantic'. The only further detail Fleming provides is his description of romantic fiction as having a beginning, a middle and an end (Newquist, 1964, p. 216). This means that he favoured novels in which readers travelled through an adventure with the characters to its successful conclusion. His own novels are constructed in this way: they present to the reader stories that take place in a world where good always triumphs over evil and where the heroes are handsome, capable and talented and demonstrate their skills with casual ease. In this world, the heroines are beautiful and find the hero irresistible, there is a sense of fair play and justice, and in the end order is restored. Fleming's novels have a British hero defeating foreign threats. His hero also helps the Americans fight their battles – rewriting the WWII power relationship between the Allies and restoring Britain to its familiar dominant position.

Fleming's novels provided his readers with an escape from their everyday. His stories conform with the romance fiction genre which Baldick (2015, p. 313) defines as fiction that 'relates improbable adventures of idealised characters in some remote or enchanted setting'. Baldick argues that modern detective fiction can be regarded as a variant of romance fiction. The James Bond novels are a highly masculinised version of this form of literature.

The other popular fiction form of the time was the 'kitchen sink dramas', a form which Fleming disliked. In an interview he commented:

> I've gotten very tired of this 'kitchen sink' period. In fact, the boiled cabbage school bores me to tears. It isn't necessary to wallow in filth to know what filth is. Things go altogether too far when filth is viewed as beauty and obscenity becomes accepted communication. The world is drab enough, and sometimes horrifying enough, without having this desolation monopolize our theater, books, and films.

I'm even old fashioned enough to disagree with the findings of the *Lady Chatterley* case. I think it would have been much better not to push that work out into the world, although I dare say the world will digest it and get used to it as it's absorbed Miller's erotic excursions into the tropics. We'll take any four-letter word without a flinch, and I suppose these words will ultimately lose their shock, their meaning. I think they rather strike an attitude on the page, however, I refuse to use them (Newquist, 1964, p. 216).

Fleming is true to his word. His novels describe James Bond's meals in delicious detail. His adventures are set in exotic locations and the characters live exciting but leisurely lives. His novels did not 'wallow in the filth' of the rebuilding of

Britain or the social changes. Fleming's prediction that readers would become desensitised to 'four-letter words' certainly came true. His novels do not include swearing or foul language.

Just as Fleming would not accept profanity in his own writing, other extreme situations – like torture – are also described carefully and without excess. In *Casino Royale*, the description of the beating Bond receives at the hand of Le Chiffre is subtle, leaving readers to imagine how the torture was inflicted and the injuries sustained:

> He was utterly a prisoner, naked and defenceless.
>
> His [Bond's] buttocks and the underpart of his body protruded through the seat of the chair towards the floor. … Then he [Le Chiffre] picked up the cane carpet-beater and, resting the handle comfortably on his knee, allowed the trefoil base to lie on the floor directly under Bond's chair. … Then his wrists sprang suddenly upwards on his knee.
>
> The result was startling.
>
> Bond's whole body arched in an involuntary spasm. His face contorted in a soundless scream and his lips drew right back away from his teeth. At the same time his head flew back with a jerk showing the taut sinews of his neck. For an instant, muscles stood out in knots all over his body and his toes and fingers clenched until they were quite white. Then his body sagged and perspiration started to bead all over his body. He uttered a deep groan. (Fleming, 1955, p. 119)

Fleming devotes more words to the consequences of the torture and the impact it had on Bond than to a description of the torture itself. The text does not explicitly describe the torture, but rather describes the suffering that Bond experiences. Fleming admitted that it was a greatly watered-down version of the French-Moroccan torture known as *Passer à la Mandoline*. For Fleming, there was no need to wallow in the horror of the torture.

This torture scene received a mixed reaction from the critics. Christopher Pym (1954) writing in *The Sunday Times*, described the scene as 'the most agonisingly simple torture scene ever devised' whereas F. W. (Muggeridge, 1953) in *Punch* coupled together the torture and sex scenes and compared them to the work of Raymond Chandler, which Fleming regarded as high praise. The reviewer for *The New York Times,* Anthony Boucher (1954), advised readers: 'You should certainly begin this book; but you might as well stop when the baccarat game is over' and describes the second half of the book as padding. This includes the torture scene which he describes as 'a set of tough cliches' (Boucher, 1954). Paul Johnson (1958), literary critic at *The New Statesman*, after reading *Dr. No* described Fleming's torture and sex scenes as the 'sadism of a school-boy bully' and 'the mechanical two-dimensional sex longings of a frustrated adolescent'.

In the same way that the reader is allowed to imagine the brutality of the torture, the sex scenes are written to present an allusion to sexual activity rather than to provide explicit details. The sexual activity between Bond and the female character is subtle, and it is left to the reader to fill in the details. For example, in *Casino Royale*, following his beating by Le Chiffre and recovery in hospital, he has dinner with Vesper Lynd and then:

> … it was only half past nine when he stepped into her room from the bathroom and closed the door behind him.
>
> The moonlight shone through the half-closed shutters and lapped at the secret shadows in the snow of her body on the broad bed.
>
> Bond awoke in his own room and for a time he lay and stroked his memories (1955, p. 171).

On the next page Bond reflected on this night:

> For a time he swam and drifted and then when the sun seemed hot enough, he came in to the beach and lay on his back and revelled in the body which the night had given back to him (1955, p. 172).

Bond is reassuring himself, and readers, that there had been no damage to his body, his sexual performance or his martial abilities as a result of the beating he received from Le Chiffre with the carpet beater. However, not everyone who was subjected to such torture made the same recovery; many lived with the horrors of war for the rest of their lives. Fleming presented a superficial version of the consequences of torture where the character of Bond is resilient and is able to easily shake off the consequences of his experiences.

Bond versus the ‘kitchen sink dramas’

Fleming clearly sees that the role of the novel is not to focus on realistic descriptions of everyday horrors, but to create an imaginative world that is uplifting, restorative and hopeful. Fleming suggests that the novel should present a worldview that is the antithesis of everyday reality: an escape. In Fleming’s novels, Bond is well educated, a navy commander, travels to exotic locations by plane, defeats foreign evildoing villains, drives fast and powerful English cars, enjoys fine food and vintage wine usually in the company of beautiful women with interesting names who find him irresistible. And in the next novel he does it all again.

By contrast, the kitchen sink dramas are populated by entirely different characters. Van O’Connor describes the kitchen sink drama protagonist as:

> … a rather seedy young man and suspicious of all pretensions. He spends a lot of time in pubs, has any number of half-hearted love affairs. He gets into trouble with his landlady, his boss, and his family. There is nothing heroic about him, unless it is his refusal to be taken in by humbug. He is a comic character, with an aura of pathos about him' (1962, p. 168).

Although the kitchen sink dramas represent the reality of life for many Britons, they do not give hope that life will improve, and the Empire's greatness will be restored. There is nothing in such novels to inspire readers to optimism or to cheer a nation drained by the sacrifices and losses of war. Van O'Connor (1962, p. 168) regards *Lucky Jim* (1954) by Kingsley Amis to be the first, and best known of the kitchen sink dramas. Other novels in this style include Alan Sillitoe's *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (1958), John Braine's *Room at the Top* (1957), Stan Barstow's *A Kind of Loving* (1960) and Keith Waterhouse*'s Billy Liar* (1959). These are novels where the working-class world of the characters is presented in detail; the struggles and challenges of factory workers abound. These are novels in which many readers would have recognised themselves and their everyday situations. The kitchen sink dramas tend to be dreary and depressing and present a world from which there is no escape for the characters from their circumstances.

Fleming was not of this milieu. He described his upbringing as over-privileged, the creature of upper-class values (Rosenberg, 1989, p. 23). His friend Ernest Cuneo claims he was easily understood, 'but only within the complex structure of the British civilisation into the upper-class stratum of which he was born' (Benson, 1984, p. xi). Therefore, the perspective he offered was based on his own biases and background – his anxieties and losses were restricted to those of his class. The loss of the Empire was deeply felt and resented among the upper and middle classes who lost employment opportunities for their men as colonial governors, civil servants, district administrators and law officers (Sinfield, 1989, p. 125). In this sense, the restoration the Bond novels promote is a fantasy, and often rigidly class-based.

To have a restorative function, novels must present stories in which Britain returns to its former position as a world power. We must bear in mind that in reality Britain would never achieve this. However, at the time it was believed this could be achieved by hard work on the part of the citizenry through their rebuilding of the cities as well of by rejuvenating the coal mining and manufacturing industries for export. The population must work together to reshape their country and build a new and better society. Marwick (1982, p. 18) claims that 'the war itself cracked many of the conventions of British society, so that idealists could genuinely welcome the peace as heralding a new dawn'. Beginning in 1945 women and men were released from the armed forces and their work in the munitions factories to begin reconstruction work (Wilson, 1980, p. 43). Fleming set his stories in this new and improved world, and his readers could witness the possibilities of living in a globalised industrial society that had recovered from the devastation of war. Readers also needed an escape from their everyday lives and to be able to indulge their consumption fetishes after

such a long period of denial. They lived in hope that the prosperity they once knew would be restored and that their living conditions would be improved as had been promised.

Food and drink in the James Bond novels as a salve to the national hunger

As an island, Britain relied on imports to meet its demands for food. During WWII the German strategy was to isolate them using maritime blockades. The German strategy was to starve the British into surrender. Basic necessities such as soap and textiles, and foodstuffs such as oranges, bananas, meat, bread (between 1946 and 1948), butter, sugar, tea and coffee became increasingly scarce until 1954, the British diet was impacted by the austerity measures imposed by the government. In order to ensure the equitable distribution of scarce food supplies and to safeguard the nutrition of the nation every person was issued a ration book and families registered with a shop (Obelkevich, 1994, p. 156). Some goods were allocated by weight per week, whereas others could be purchased based on a points system; the number of points required for purchase was varied according to demand. There was no surety of supply, and after queuing all day at a store you might get to the front of the line and find that the grocer had exhausted the supply of what you were queuing for. There was a high level of self-sufficiency in rural areas, and among urban Britons there was a surge in allotments as they were encouraged to grow their own food to supplement their rations. The most popular crops were those that provided the maximum yield on the minimum plot size: carrots, parsnips, potatoes, chickens and rabbits. Nothing was wasted and food scraps were collected and fed to pigs. Restaurant meals were available but controlled; there was a maximum price limit of five shillings. Eating out was popular only for those who could afford it. For factory workers and Britons whose homes had been bombed, the local government-run ‘British Restaurants’ provided cheap meals.

After many years of restrictions and abstinence, Ian Fleming’s novels tempted Britons with lavish mouth-watering descriptions of meals and food in comparison to the kitchen sink dramas. In *Casino Royale*, Bond has a breakfast of ‘half a pint of orange juice, three scrambled eggs and bacon and a double portion of coffee without sugar’. (1955, p. 28) That same day in the casino: ‘the men were drinking inexhaustible quarter-bottles of champagne, the women dry martinis’ (1955, p. 37). Later in the day Bond has ‘his first straight whisky “on the rocks” and was contemplating the *pate de fois gras* and cold langouste which the waiter had just laid before him’ (1955, p. 45). For dinner at the casino, Bond and Vesper Lynd have:

> … caviar and then… a plain grilled *rognon de veal pommes soufflés*. And then I'd like to have *fraises de bois* with a lot of cream.
>
> … 'and bring plenty of toast.'… 'The trouble always is,' [Bond] explained to Vesper, 'not how to get enough caviar, but how to get enough toast with it.'…
>
> 'Now' he turned back to the menu, 'I myself will accompany mademoiselle with the caviar, but then I would like a very small *tournedos*, underdone, with *sauce Bearnaise* and a *coeur d'artichaut*. While Mademoiselle is enjoying the strawberries, I will have half an avocado pear with a little French dressing. Do you approve?'
>
> The *maître d'hotel* bowed (1955, p. 60).

Fleming has Bond starting his day by eating a breakfast that is the equivalent of three weeks' worth of rations, accompanied by drinks that had not been available for many years. For dinner he ate exotic foods that had not been seen on British menus for since the war began. For readers who had been eating rabbit and squirrel stews, desserts made using carrots or parsnips, tea without sugar and cakes without eggs, this amounted to food pornography. Eventually food rationing would end, allowing the foods that had been restricted, and that Bond was eating in the novels, to become freely available once more. Until then, the pleasure of eating these foods could only be enjoyed vicariously. In contrast, the characters in the kitchen sink dramas were eating bacon and fried bread or cornflakes for breakfast, washed down with endless pots of tea. Rather than exotic cocktails, they drank pints of beer after a day's work in the factory. The 'kitchen sink dramas' are not uplifting fiction that is looking forward to what will once again be available to enjoy. The James Bond novels do and this makes them far more restorative and uplifting for readers.

A Night Out – Two Different Perspectives

Fleming opens *Casino Royale* as follows:

> 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 (1955, p. 7).

The short paragraph certainly sets the scene for this novel, and the James Bond series. Fleming has not invoked images of glamour and wealth when describing the casino, instead he uses images of decay, the social decay caused by greed and the accompanying fear and nervous tension. Fleming wants to portray the patrons at the casino as desperate, foolishly gambling more than they can afford with the promise of winning big. Fleming puts Bond in a situation similar to this. Bond has gone to the casino to win against Le Chiffre who is gambling to repay a large sum of money he borrowed before the loan is discovered. Fleming is

establishing his credentials as an insider – that he is from this world. To other readers, he is giving them a glimpse inside a world that is foreign and unknown to them, but one to which they aspire.

Compare Fleming's description of the casino in the early morning with the description given by Stan Barstow in *A Kind of Loving* as Vic Brown enters the Gala Rooms:

> When I open the big door into the hall, I walk slap into a wall of attar of sweat and *eau-de-kerniff* that you could cut with a knife. It nearly stops me in my tracks. I stick it, though, thinking I'll get used to it in a couple of minutes, and go in, trying not to breathe through my nose (1986, p. 37).

This description would be familiar to most of Barstow's and Fleming's readers. The sentiments expressed in both descriptions are similar: they both find the overwhelming smell of the room revolting. The characteristic smell of the room emanates from the patrons present, their daily activity and tension. Barstow evokes a powerful image with his reference to *eau-de-kerniff*, the smell of repressed sexual tension mixed with the cheap cologne worn by the men in the room to camouflage the 'factory smell of oil-suds, machinery, and shaved steel' (Stillitoe, 1985, p. 32). In both descriptions, if you want to participate you need to overcome the revulsion and push through to enjoy the rewards that the situation offers. For Bond, it will be winning against Le Chiffre; for Vic, he hopes to catch a glimpse of Ingrid whom he is convinced is female perfection, his true love.

Looking Towards a Brighter Future

The opening paragraph of *Casino Royale* is a metaphor for the rebuilding of Britain. The smell of the burning cities, the sweat required to rebuild, the gamble of changing government and a democratisation of society – the fear and nervousness of the changes. Such changes can be unbearable – it was a high stakes gamble – but Britons survived and prevailed, and there were rewards. During the war, women had an opportunity to work outside the home and demanded that continue (Wilson, 1980, p. 47); cities and some rural areas were rebuilt as modern productive centres (Marwick, 1982, p. 20); there was a great communal spirit developed among those left at home and those contributing away from home; the Empire was replaced by the Commonwealth, which was a loosely associated fellowship of independent countries. Britain did recover economically with two thirds of their exports from science-based technology industries (Marwick, 1982, p. 33) and they developed a new cultural diversity as unskilled and professional workers migrated to Britain to help with the rebuilding (Marwick, 1982, p. 32).

While the novels provided a distraction from the everyday, they also gave Britons hope – hope that the sacrifices of the war would be rewarded and they would live in a fair and equitable Britain: a hope that was necessary to ensure the common purpose of Britons in the restoration and rebuilding of the post-war period.

Fleming's novels act as restorative fiction because they were uplifting at a time when Britons needed to work hard on re-establishing themselves globally. Unlike the kitchen sink narratives, the novels did not wallow in the filth of the restoration and the hard work that would be required to rebuild. Ian Fleming's James Bond novels provided an escape from the everyday. They provided hope that foods that had been absent from the British meal table for a long time would return and that Britain could defeat foreign threats. They provided readers with a view into a restored Britain to which they could look forward.

Notes

1 See Storey (2010), who quotes Anderson on the novel and the newspaper as nation-enabling cultural forms, because both present imagined communities working together.

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