Fleming's spooky life - Removing the cover from Bond's creator

(Keay Davidson)

The world's spy services are in disarray. The Cold War has disappeared, and taken with it their traditional raison d'etre. The Central Intelligence Agency is simultaneously "downsizing," seeking new missions (e.g., studying global warming), and struggling to exorcise the ghost of convicted traitor Aldrich Ames from its hallways.

In Russia, the KGB is chasing black-market mobsters and Chechen terrorists, not American spies and saboteurs. In England, Prime Minister John Major is unlocking spy archives long shrouded by the Official Secrets Act. Even the U.S. National Security Agency - which once denied its own existence - today runs a public museum, hosts an intriguing Web page and offers job internships to high school students ( "A grade point average of B is preferred" ).

Yet the romantic myths of espionage endure. Witness the mega-success of the latest James Bond film, "Goldeneye," starring Pierce Brosnan as the dapper British agent who always saves the world and beds the lady before the credits roll.

Bond's cinematic durability might have stunned his creator, the late British author Ian Fleming. Fleming published the first Bond novel, "Casino Royale," in 1953, during the High Noon of the Cold War. The book sold briskly but not sensationally. Reviewers were generally friendly - they compared Fleming to Eric Ambler and Peter Cheyney, also distinguished thriller writers - but complained about the book's torture scenes. Even Fleming's brother-in-law lamented the book's brutality: "the most disgusting thing I've ever seen in print - torture such as Japs and Huns eschewed as not cricket," he lamented in a letter to his sister. "I always knew he (Fleming) was neurotic and tangled. . . ."

To which Claus von Bulow might have added: "You have no idea." Fleming's sadomasochistic sexual activities and adultery were among the lurid fragments of his private life, fragments that Andrew Lycett in a new biography from Turner Publishing, "Ian Fleming - The Man Behind James Bond," tries to assemble into a coherent psychological portrait. The result is an engaging, informative and occasionally surprising book.

Lycett, an Oxford-educated foreign correspondent for the London Times, situates Fleming in a larger political context - the two global wars of the first half of the 20th century, followed by the nuclear age and its prospects (mercifully unfulfilled) of a third and final apocalypse.

Fleming was arguably the most important "pop" writer of the Cold War. His romantic view of espionage sugar-coated (especially in the movie versions) what is mostly a grimy and tedious enterprise - see John le Carre's novels. One wonders: Would Americans have tolerated the CIA's covert activities if the Bond films hadn't misrepresented such activities as a lark, rather than as cold-hearted activities that often thwart the dreams of oppressed nations?

Ironically, Fleming seems to have regarded the Cold War as a typically American mania. He despised Joe McCarthy, J. Edgar Hoover and other American Red-bashers who fanned fear of "commies" and who turned what should have been routine squabbles between superpowers into rehearsals for atomic apocalypse.

At the risk of taking Fleming too seriously - he certainly didn't take himself very seriously - I hope that Lycett's study will encourage historians of popular culture to assess Fleming's larger significance. Fleming joked that the Bond books were just adolescent fantasies, a reflection of his own failure to grow up emotionally (as his countless jilted lovers would discover). Still, fantasies tell much about a culture's secret yearnings and tensions.

Fleming's books, mostly written in the 1950s, reflect a now-vanished age of British power and male domination, and deserve closer academic scrutiny if for no other reason. Thanks to Lycett's careful work (which regrettably lacks footnotes), scholars will have an easier time analyzing the Bond myth in psychoanalytic, feminist and ideological terms.

For example: Was Bond a symbol of Fleming's revered father, who died fighting in World War I when Ian was 9? How much did Bond's disdainful view of women stem from Fleming's troubled relationship with his dominating mother and his inability to sustain intimate relationships with women? How does Pussy Galore (Fleming's most dynamic femme fatale) embody contradictory male fantasies about women?

Fleming's private life was a "sexual revolution" in miniature, a full decade before that phrase swept pop culture. He entertained a fair number of gay friends, including Noel Coward and Truman Capote, at his Jamaican estate (dubbed Goldeneye, which inspired the name of the latest Bond flick). His letters (quoted by Lycett) to and from his many female lovers are full of giggly references to his prowess with whips. "It's very lonely not to be beaten and shouted at every five minutes," his lover Ann O'Neill (later Lady Fleming) wrote him once.

Descended from wealthy Scots, and forever competitive with his older brother Peter (himself a successful author), Fleming was born in 1908 in England. His father was a member of Parliament and friend of Winston Churchill. And like Churchill, Fleming spent the first two-thirds of his life screwing up opportunity after opportunity. He failed at almost every career he tried - "army officer, diplomat, journalist, banker and stockbroker."

Then in 1953, at age 45, he wrote his first novel - "Casino Royale." Within a few years he was one of the world's premier thriller writers. By the time of his death in 1964, his creation, Bond, had become a film industry that would thrive to this day.

Fleming worked for British naval intelligence during World War II. As a spy, he developed a reputation for imaginative, even bizarre schemes. However, few if any of these schemes seem to have been carried out. Judging by Lycett's account, Fleming the spy bears less resemblance to James Bond than he does to Oliver North, the "Irangate" spook distinguished mainly for his boyish enthusiasm and comical ineffectiveness.

With one crucial difference: Fleming lacked North's fanatical devotion to the cause of anti-communism. Fleming was a playboy obsessed with cars and sex, not ideologies. He regarded espionage as a game, a sport akin to the sports he played at Eton. He viewed extreme anti-communists as misfits who should take the world less seriously and relax with a nice cocktail (shaken, not stirred).

Consider Fleming's reaction to the Cold War's most influential demagogues, the Unholy Trinity of Red-baiting: Sen. Joseph McCarthy, FBI chief J. Edgar Hoover and radio gossip-monger Walter Winchell. As "McCarthyism" swept America in the early 1950s, Fleming denounced the "prairie fire of fear, intolerance and hatred." He warned: "The sun would indeed be darkened if history were to bring (McCarthy, Hoover and Winchell) together, or any closer together, before this giant country has found itself." How right he was. What influence, if any, did Fleming's novels have on real-life espionage and Cold War politics? Historians have long known that Fleming's fans included CIA spymaster Allen Dulles and President John F. Kennedy. In 1960 Fleming had dinner with then-Sen. Kennedy and, Lycett records, "suggested that the best way to deal with Castro was not to take him too seriously, but rather to make a fool of him. Drawing on one of his wartime exploits, and with his tongue firmly in his cheek, he came up with the preposterous idea that the Americans should drop leaflets from the air, informing the Cuban people that their beards were a natural receptacle for radioactivity and would lead to their long-term impotence."

Instead, Kennedy became president and took Castro altogether too seriously by (1) sponsoring an ill-fated invasion at the Bay of Pigs and (2) risking the fate of the entire world by forcing the Soviets, at gunpoint, to remove missiles from Cuba (an act of supreme hypocrisy, as the United States maintained similar missiles on the edge of the Soviet Union). Kennedy's macho posture triggered a new arms race, needlessly prolonged the Cold War and poisoned U.S.-Cuba relations to this very day.

What if, instead, Kennedy had listened to Fleming? Then he would have dismissed Cuba as a peripheral strategic nuisance - as a problem for diplomats, not generals - and we baby-boomers would have spent a smaller fraction of our childhoods learning how to "duck and cover" beneath our desks.

Ian Fleming

(Andrew Lycett)

An unusually elegant biography of a mysterious figure who tended to hide his light under a bushel. The James Bond character taken from his own life. Ian Fleming was infinitely more complicated and interesting than his famous fictional hero, James Bond.

At Eton and later Sandhurst, he failed to finish the course, always showing more interest in fast living and romantic verse (Andrew Lycett introduces us to Fleming's poignant early poetry).

As a young man he straddled several different worlds with varying degrees of success: literary London (Harold Nicolson put him in a novel), Bohemia (his imposing mother had a child by Augustus John), clubland, country houses and the City, where his family owned the eponymous merchant bank.

The war was his making. In naval intelligence, he master-minded top secret operations, including his favourite, 'Golden Eye', uncovered here for the first time. His role in moulding the prototype Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) is also fully described.

From the late 1930s he courted the vivacious Ann O'Neill. But for fifteen years he refused to wed her, even after her first husband was killed in the war. They continued a passionate relationship which resulted in their marriage only after she became pregnant by him a second time.

As a diversion, he escaped into fantasy and invented James Bond, who would become the most successful fictional spy of the twentieth century. Here Lycett offers the fullest ever account of Agent 007's publishing history and cultural significance.

Fleming soon tired of the writing treadmill and with his health beginning to fail and his marriage to Ann running into difficulties he found solace on the golf course and at his secluded cliff-top villa in Jamaica. There he met the uncomplicated divorcée who provided the support and adoration he needed. But his extra-marital happiness only infuriated Ann, making their relationship more fraught, and driving her into the unlikely arms of Hugh Gaitskell, leader of the Labour Party. Lycett's immaculately researched biography tells this compelling story for the first time.

With an extraordinary cast of characters, this is classical biography - part history, part gossip, part informed reassessment of one of the century's most celebrated yet mysterious personalities.

Ian Fleming - The Man Behind James Bond By Andrew Lycett

(Review by Tony Buchsbaum)

His name was Fleming, Ian Fleming. And the character he created in a small house in Jamaica was a hero for all the world. Now, for the first time in 30 years, Ian Fleming is the subject of a new biography by Andrew Lycett.

Ian Fleming: The Man Behind James Bond is a detailed, intimate look behind the scenes, and behind the mask of a man who lived a life of privilege and high expectations, a life in which cars went fast-and women went faster.

Fleming was the son of a stockbroker who helped raise the capital for the Atcheson, Topeka, and Santa Fe railroad. After Valentine Fleming was killed in World War I, his sons and their mother flitted through London society. Ian learned both the spoken language and body language of the high life, and these would forever color his perspective, attitude, and actions.

After brief periods as a stockbroker and reporter, Fleming was drafted into the secret service. MI5 offered him the chance to use his social graces, his intimate knowledge of liquor and women, and his fascination with cars and all things mechanical. As a spy, he made a name for himself as a man who could get things done-dangerous things. In time, he became a member of the group who created the prototype organization for the CIA. He even met with John F. Kennedy to discuss plans to embarrass Castro and generate his fall from power.

Not until after his wedding, on honeymoon in Jamaica, did Fleming begin writing fiction. In Casino Royale and 13 other books, James Bond would become a hero of the cold war, and in the movies that started with Dr. No in 1962, he would become the most successful action hero of all time.

Fleming filled his novels with telling details from his own life. The names of women and villains came from people he knew. Some of the plots came from MI5 itself. Even the gadgets had bases in reality. And in the name of BondÕs boss, Fleming paid tribute to the tempestuous relationship he had with his mother-whom he called, simply, "M." As a writer, he was able to turn fact into fantasy-and with a wry smile that told the everyone they were in on the joke.

Sadly, Fleming never saw the worldwide success of his hero. During the filming of Goldfinger, in 1964, a heart attack cut Fleming's lifelong adventure short.

Whether you're a fan of James Bond or not, Andrew Lycett's biography is highly appealing. Its twin portraits of Ian Fleming-as a gentleman and as an ambitious, hard-driving force of nature-leave you wondering which was the real man.

Ian Fleming has all the excitement of the best Bond novels-all the passion and tragedy of a great love story and, with its dropped names, all the fun of a gossip column. In other words, it gives one of Fleming's own titles a truth he never imagined: You only live twice.

THE MYSTERY OF GOLDENEYE

James Bond & Ian Fleming-The Men & the Myth

Some years ago I discovered the existence of the real James Bond while researching the background of one of his associates, a known CIA agent. I eventually located and interviewed James Bond, the distinguished American ornithologist, from whom Ian Fleming appropriated the name for his secret agent 007.

At the request of James Bond's wife, Mrs. Mary Bond, I did not publish this story at the time so Mr. Bond could continue his ornithological work without interruption.

With the death of Bond in 1989, the recent publication of a biography, The Private Life of James Bond (by David Contosta, Sutter House, Pa., 1993), along with the release of the movie Goldeneye, I no longer feel obligated to refrain from publishing the story of my inquiry and association with Mr. Bond.

Since both the official and the unauthorized biographies of Ian Fleming are absolutely wrong in their characterizations of Bond - he did not consider it funny, but in fact deeply resented the invasion of his privacy, this is an attempt to correct the record.

Although this manuscript was written over a period of years, there was no hurry to complete it until the advent of the Goldeneye movie, which is the first 007 film not based on the title or plot of an Ian Fleming story.

While both the Goldeneye movie and this manuscript, The Mystery of Goldeneye (Copyright TXu588-597 - July 27, 1994) take their titles from the name Ian Fleming bestowed upon his Jamaican home, where he wrote all of the 007 stories, the movie screenplay is a work of fiction, while this manuscript is entirely non-fiction. You should find the Mystery more intriguing than the movie.

The people in this story are real, the events occurred as described, and they should not be confused with any fictional characters or plots devised by others.

William E. Kelly - November, 1995