

James Bond Hates Italians

Marc Edward DiPaolo (June 23, 2008)



We all know that Bond hates women. But he's also leery of Italians, and Americans, and everyone who isn't British. However, he just LOVES scrambled eggs



"There's nothing extraordinary about American gangsters," protested [James] Bond. "They're not Americans. Mostly a lot of Italian bums with monogrammed shirts who spend the day eating spaghetti and meat-balls and squirting scent over themselves.... greaseballs who filled themselves up with pizza pie and beer all week and on Saturdays knocked off a garage or drug store so as to pay their way at the races."

- Ian Fleming, *Diamonds are Forever* (1956)

Inspired by my love of the recent James Bond film *Casino Royale*, I decided to return to Ian Fleming's original novels. Several years back I had read the final three books in the series, *On Her Majesty's Secret Service*, *You Only Live Twice*, and *The Man with the Golden Gun*, because I knew he got married in the first of these three, and I was eager to see the character "humanized." The first of these was a great book. The others were mediocre, so I stopped reading them.

Since the recent Bond film (featuring Daniel Craig) was based on the first novel, I thought I'd act like a normal person and read the series from the beginning. So I read *Casino Royale*, *Live and Let Die*, and a few short stories - *Risico*, *Quantum of Solace*, *For Your Eyes Only*, and *007 in New York*.

I have a series of impressions I'd like to share with you.

Casino Royale is a great book. I don't know what I think of *Live and Let Die*. It is on balance good but I have big problems with it. (More on that later.) I like *Risico*, *For Your Eyes Only*, and *The Living Daylights*. All these stories represent chunks of the movies *For Your Eyes Only* and *The Living Daylights*. The stories were not meant to go together, which is why *For Your Eyes Only* in particular is such a disjointed film.

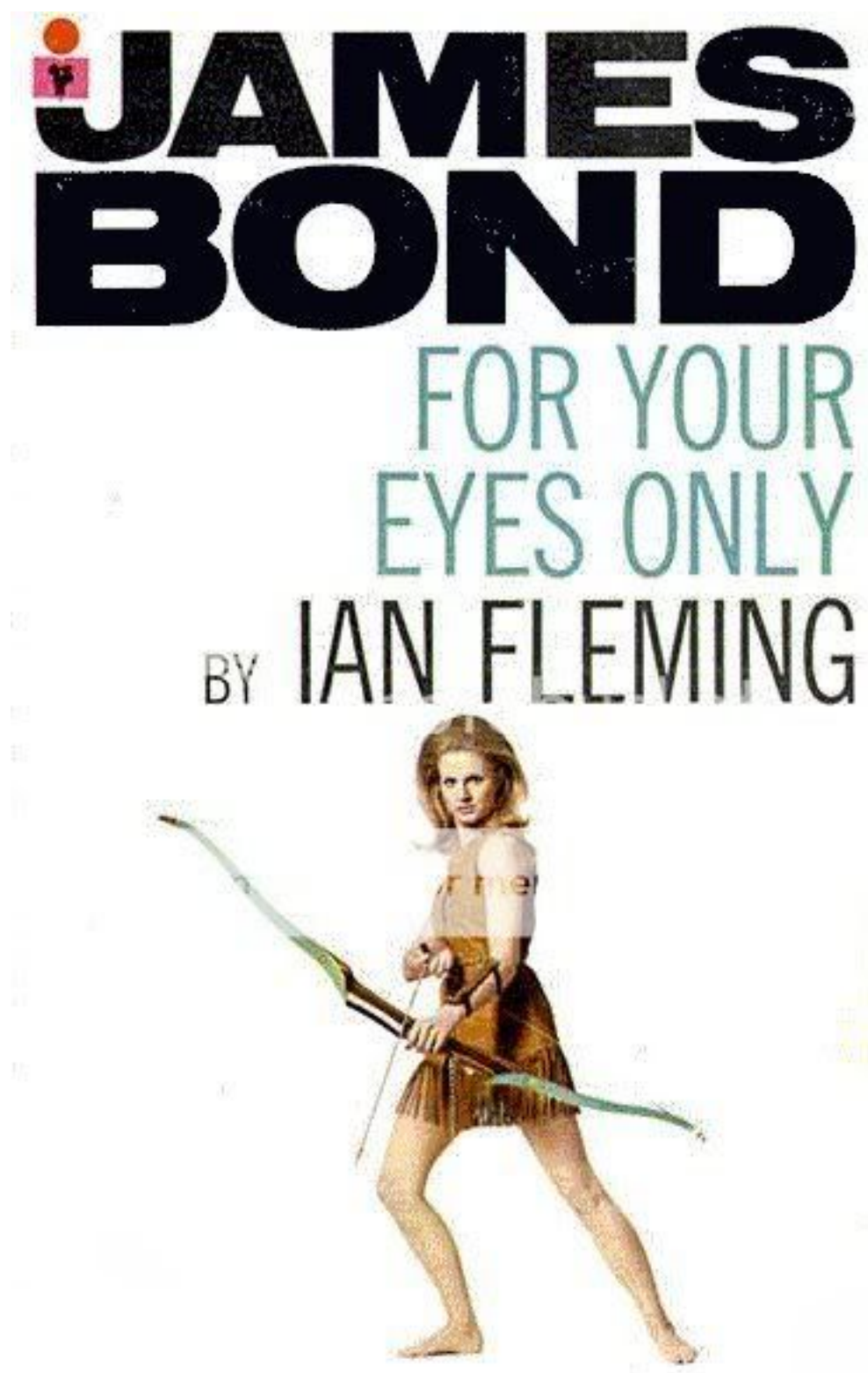
However on the whole the books and short stories are great and awful at the same time. They are astonishingly racist, sexist, and anti-American, even if you expect such things from James Bond ... as any one who has seen the movies would expect. However, the books reveal an interesting perspective on the Cold War era and have some very suspenseful and entertaining bits. They can be great fun, like the best comic books and westerns. Male escapism at its height.



[2] Action aside, the best parts of the books are the odd character bits and gratuitous editorializing that blurs the line between Fleming and his character, making readers wonder where Bond stops and Fleming begins. These little passages are, in effect, the only escape from the plot, which (given the fact that the books are all moderately short) usually pushes the action forward to the point that the narrative is soon revealed to be fairly ... thin?

These fairly regular editorial passages seeded throughout the books - often about what makes Japan interesting, how to serve a martini properly, what's wrong with American foreign policy - can be some of the worst parts of the books as well as some of the best ... especially when Fleming's prejudices rear their ugly heads in a way that is fascinating only as a study in the character flaws of the author. For example, sometimes Fleming describes ethnic types and social classes in insightful and revealing manners. During other times, however, his descriptions border on minstrel-show prejudice and can be at least annoying, if not offensive.

Here are a few examples of what Fleming has to say about Italians, Americans, and African-Americans:



[3]a) Fleming has fun describing the exaggerated speech and mannerisms of Italians and Italian-Americans. It is often appealing and affectionate, despite being stereotypical. In *For Your Eyes Only*, Bond befriends an Italian gangster named Columbo (who is played in the movie version by Topol). Here's a descriptive bit from the book in which Columbo demonstrates some of the same personality traits that I often display, including boisterousness, public displays of affection, and chest-pounding:

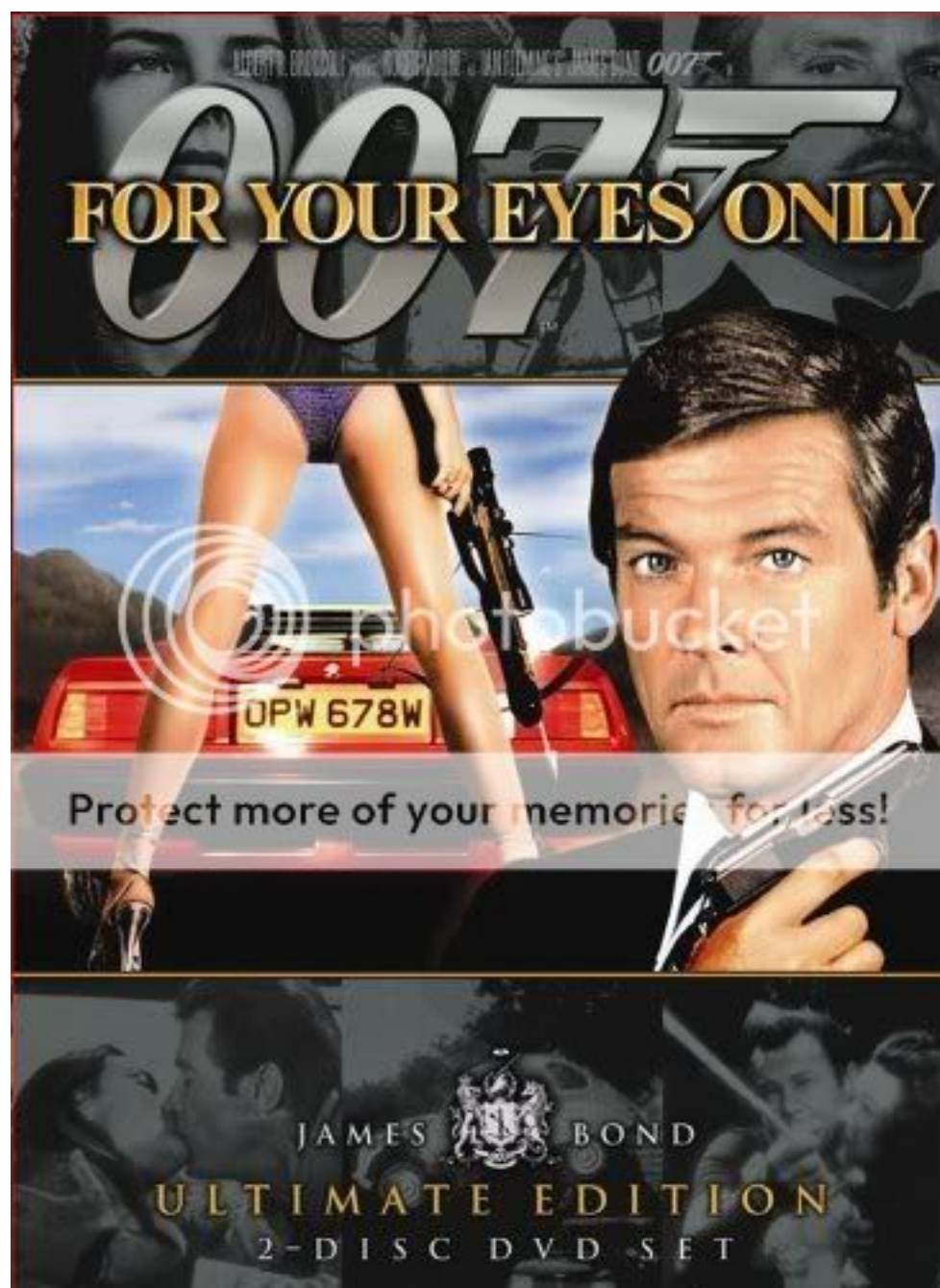
'[Bond] turned to find Columbo approaching him. The fat man was grinning delightedly. He came up to Bond and, to Bond's horror, threw open his arms, clutched Bond to him, and kissed him on both

cheeks.

Bond said: "For God's sake, Columbo."

Columbo roared with laughter. "Ah, the quiet Englishman! He fears nothing save the emotions. But me," he hit himself in the chest, "me, Enrico Columbo, loves this man and he is not ashamed to say so."

Those who know me would agree that I've acted like this on many occasions. As my friend Griffin would say on such occasions, "Marc, I'm Irish. Don't hug me. Shake my hand." I found this passage endearing. If only it had been the only thing he wrote about Italians, or Italian-Americans. I find some of the dialogue in *Diamonds are Forever* less amusing. (See the top of the post for an example.)



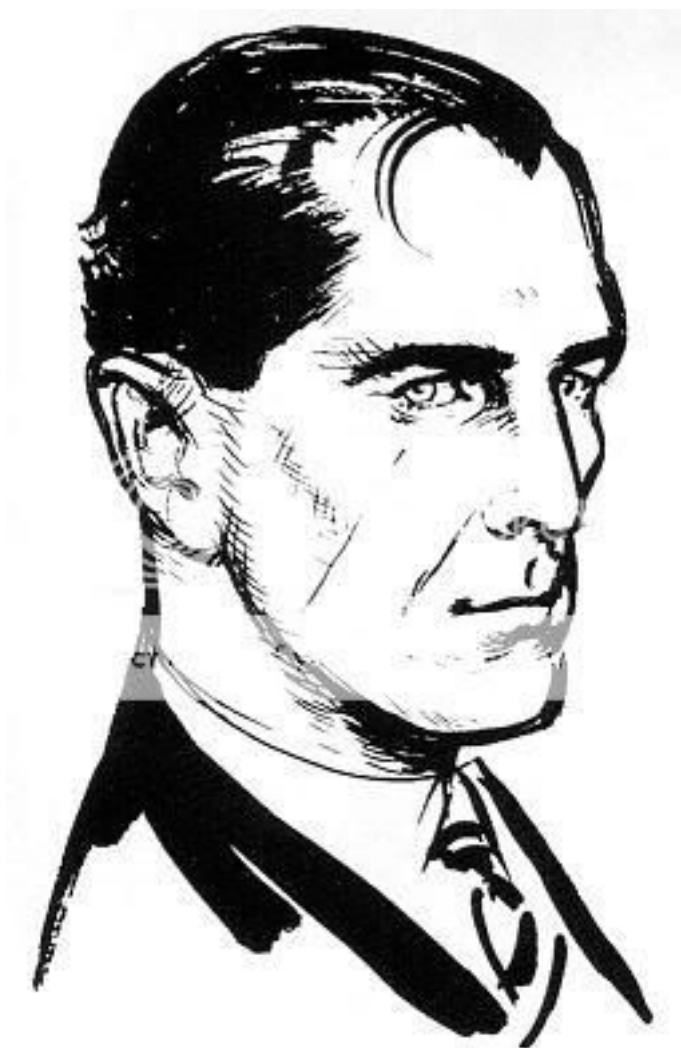
[4]b) Fleming talks smack about Americans a lot. He criticizes them for having lousy food, overly luxurious cars, and a minimal vocabulary, among other flaws. As Bond observes in *For Your Eyes Only*, "You can get far in North America with laconic grunts. 'Huh?' 'Hmmm...' and 'Hi!' in their various modulations, together with

'sure,' 'guess so,' 'that so?' and 'crap!' will meet almost any contingency."

Funny. True to a large degree. But tiresome after several consecutive books. As a recent article (either in *The Atlantic* or the *New Yorker* ... I forget) "James Bond: Anti-American" reported, the American Agent Felix Leiter is a nice character who exists primarily to show how incompetent Americans are and how much they need British help.

c) The movie *Live and Let Die* is far less racist than the book, but still makes me a bit uncomfortable. (The book is replete with racist moments, but the one that bothered me the most was Solitaire, descendant of a French slave owner, noting that she was rarely upset whenever she coaxed the black gangster Mr. Big into killing people because "very few of them were white." Shudder.)

- The sexism of the books is legendary. Of course, if one assumes that the books represent escapism for men, this is to be understood to an extent. The books cross the line. But they are admittedly titillating when they are not frustrating for running down women too much. The sex scenes in the books, short as they are, are far better than the lousy sex scenes in the movies, which generate no heat whatsoever. Also, Fleming is very good at describing every inch of a woman's body in a way that is enticing. Still, the passages do objectify and fetishize the women in a way that most women would find offensive (and that I do too ... when I'm not being enticed by them... sorry...)



[5]- In the books, Vesper mentions that James Bond reminds her of Hoagy Carmichael. Bond disagrees. I popped in my DVD of *The Best Years of Our Lives* and took another look at Hoagy. He's a good look for Bond, which means that Roger Moore and Pierce Brosnan look the most like the character was originally designed to look. I also remember



hearing that James Stewart was Fleming's first choice for Bond, followed by Cary Grant and Frank Sinatra. However, he reportedly loved Sean Connery in the part. (The drawing represents how Fleming imagined Bond.)

In the novel, Bond has black hair, a Superman-like spit curl in front of his forehead, a scar on his cheek, and beautiful blue eyes that undercut the overall look of his face, which is revealed to be little more than a "mask of cruelty" when he sleeps.

- This is the funny bit: James Bond spends an amazing amount of time talking about food. Bond even informs the readers two of his favorite recipes:

1) Bond's Dry Martini: The Vesper (from Casino Royale)

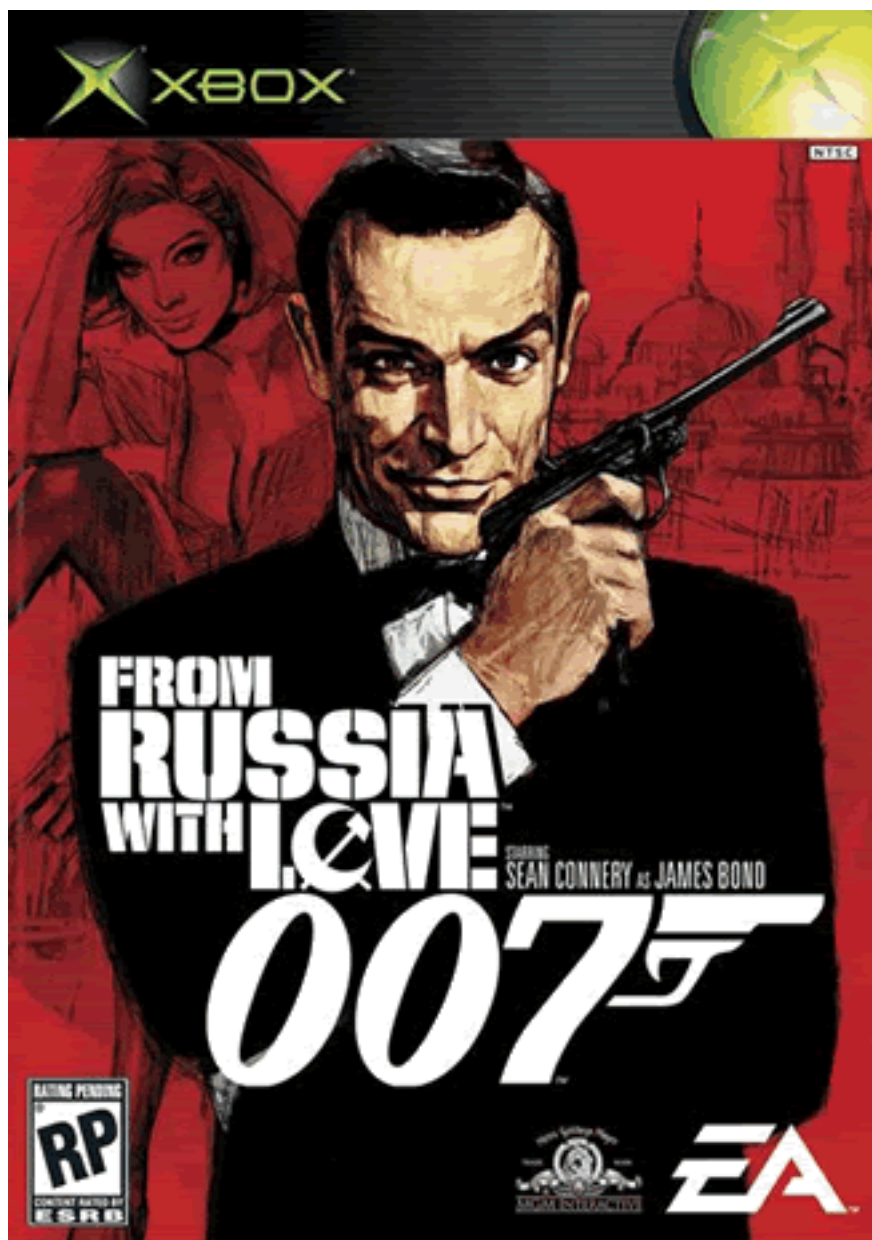
Three measures of Gordon's

one of vodka

half a measure of Kina Lillet

Shake it very well until it's ice cold, then add a large slice of lemon peel.

And here's my favorite:



[6]2) James Bond's Scrambled Eggs

(From 007 in New York, page 128, Penguin Books 2002)

(serves four 'individualists')

"12 fresh eggs

salt and pepper

5-6 oz. fresh butter.

Break the eggs into a bowl. Beat thoroughly with a fork and season well. In a small copper (or heavy-bottomed saucepan) melt four oz. of the butter. When melted, pour in the eggs and cook over a very low heat, whisking continuously with a small egg whisk. While the eggs are slightly more moist than you would wish for eating, remove pan from heat, add rest of butter, and continue whisking for half a minute, adding the while finely chopped chives or fine herbs. Serve on hot buttered toast in individual copper dishes (for appearance only) with pink champagne (Taittinger) and low music."

WHAT?!?!? And my friends think I'm effete? They should check out how finicky James Bond is about his scrambled eggs and leave me alone.

- The best things the movies have over the books is the inclusion of beautiful location shooting in India, Russia, Venice, and a variety of lovely countries. The books seem to confine themselves to Britain, Jamaica, and a handful of other places, and the action is largely confined to Bond's hotel rooms, where he has lots of sex and eats lots of scrambled eggs. So the movies best the books in terms of visual pleasure. Beautiful locales as well as beautiful women ... that make you want to see the world.

- There are something like 23 James Bond movies. Here are the good ones, from great to very good:



[7] 1) From Russia With Love

(Sean Connery)

2) Casino Royale (Daniel Craig)



- 3) The World is Not Enough (Pierce Brosnan)
- 4) Goldfinger (Sean Connery)
- 5) Goldeneye (Pierce Brosnan)
- 6) Dr. No (Sean Connery)
- 7) The Spy Who Loved Me (Roger Moore)
- 8) The Living Daylights (Timothy Dalton)
- 9) Live and Let Die (Roger Moore)
- 10) Octopussy (Roger Moore)

Just my opinion. There are some good and mediocre ones I didn't mention. Diamonds are Forever has some good moments, despite some obnoxious gay-bashing. If For Your Eyes Only were a half hour shorter it would be wonderful. As it is - 2 stars..

These are the Bond films I really frickin' hate:
You Only Live Twice

Tomorrow Never Dies

Die Another Day

Never Say Never Again

A View to a Kill

Moonraker (sadly, this has one of the prettiest and most interesting Bond women, Dr. Goodhead - I kid you not.)

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