

Interview with Van Jensen, author of *Casino Royale*

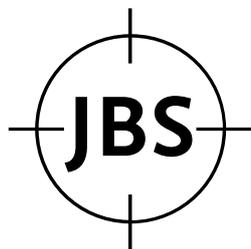
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ELLEN J. STOCKSTILL

In March 2018, Dynamite Entertainment published a graphic novel adaptation of Ian Fleming's first James Bond novel, *Casino Royale*. Dynamite secured the license to adapt the novel from the Fleming estate back in 2014 and slated writer Van Jensen and artist Dennis Calero to produce the adaptation. In the following interview, Jensen describes the process of adapting Fleming's novel, some of the challenges of working with an iconic character like James Bond, Fleming's writing style, Bond's current and historical relevance, and the ways in which Fleming's legacy lives on in different mediums.

Ellen Stockstill: Can you explore the relevance of this particular medium to the Bond franchise? Why this form, and why this kind of adaptation now in this particular period of Bond's cultural lifespan?

Van Jensen: Ultimately, the question of "Why a graphic novel?" is one that was considered and answered by the Fleming Publishing Library, as it was their decision to pursue the publishing partnership with Dynamite Entertainment. I do



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know that the novel adaptations were the first project to be discussed, and I understand that it is very dear to them. For me personally, I find comic books and graphic novels to be an essential medium because they exist at this perfect half-way point between prose and film. Prose asks readers to fill in so much sensory information. Film provides pretty much all of it. Both are great, but I just love the way that they provide visuals but then stimulate the mind to fill in so many gaps. Sounds. Smells. The movement between the staccato moments of the panels. My hope for these adaptations is that they come at a time when Bond is ripe for reflection and reevaluation, that generations weaned on the movies or even video games can go back and discover the foundation beneath all of that.

ES: You came to this project having worked with some iconic superhero characters: The Flash and Green Lantern. Did that experience help you approach a character like James Bond? What kind(s) of pressure do you feel as a writer when working with an iconic character loved and known by so many?

VJ: Writing superhero comics, the challenge is taking a property and character that's been around for eighty years and doing something new while not really changing anything. The Flash, for instance, can't just give up his superhero-ing ways and become the world's fastest actuary. James Bond has been a bit different in that this is a direct adaptation of Fleming's first Bond novel. The desire on all sides was to leave the story intact, just make it work in the comic format. So what carried over from my earlier work in comics is really just the experiential insights of knowing how comics work as a medium, how the story flows through panels on the page, how to craft moments that grab readers. But pressure? Oh, yes, plenty of pressure. This is James Bond! I grew up on the films, then moved on to the novels in high school and college, so I had my own reverence to contend with before I even got to the matter of this being one of the most iconic characters in all the world.

ES: Were there aspects of the novel that you immediately knew would work well in the visual and textual medium of a graphic novel? Were there aspects that you knew would not work well or that were more of a challenge to adapt?

VJ: *Casino Royale* is unique in the series of novels in that there's precious little that obviously and readily translates well to visuals. There's gambling. There are fancy dinners. There's a long stretch in a hospital. Aside from the brief car chase and the botched explosion early on, the novel is bereft of the action-adventure

sequences we've come to expect of the genre. Making the baccarat work was tricky. A big table with a ton of characters and lots and lots of narration. And lots of text is a recipe for the most boring comic ever. There's also the two-page stretch of Bond, post-torture, lying in a hospital bed worrying that he might be impotent. For each of these, I challenged myself to come up with some innovative approaches, either by deliberateness in perspective, or symbolic representations, to tell the story visually.

ES: I read that you were surprised by the “interiority” offered in Fleming’s novel. How did you strive to convey Bond’s interiority in your adaptation? Do you find interiority difficult to convey in a graphic novel?

VJ: Specifically, what surprised me is the character of Bond, how unformed he is, and vulnerable. The novel is all third-person narration, delving deep into Bond’s character as he takes on the form we know, but exploring the thoughts of other characters in detail. It’s a lot of text. And with comics, space is the great limiting factor, so having lots of text means you lose a lot of visual space on the page. The thought bubble was the old tactic to represent such interiority in comics, but that tool is (sadly) viewed as passé in the medium. I came up with the idea of “Bond-vision,” which is going to be an overlay of Bond’s thoughts on top of his surroundings. Every room he goes into, every person he meets, he is sizing up threats, analyzing potential outcomes. It’s a coldness and shrewdness inherent in his person and his craft. Fleming brought it alive with prose, and my challenge was keeping it present while not drowning Dennis Calero’s gorgeous art with text.

ES: Did you do any research or secondary reading to help you in your work? If so, what and why?

VJ: I returned to the other Bond novels and some of the Bond resource guides out there, both newer and older. I cast a pretty wide net in researching the time, to get a feel of post-war France. And then I watched a bunch of videos on YouTube of baccarat. I hate to say I had no real familiarity with the game before embarking on the project. And now... Well, I probably could at least not embarrass myself completely if I attempted to play.

ES: In his book *The Politics of James Bond*, Jeremy Black writes that Britain's decline "and the changing British world role and view of the world, can all be approached via Bond. Alongside the apparent timelessness of the icon, there is a timely awareness of historical change [...] Aside from being a mixture of Cold War warrior and a medieval knight rescuing maidens from modern dragons, even at risk to his mission, Bond was also a conduit through whom Fleming explored the ambivalent relationship between a declining Britain and an ascendant United States" (2005, x). Do you see Bond as a character of history as Black suggests? One moment I think of in *Casino Royale* where this gets played out is in Leiter's lifeline to Bond at the baccarat table with his "Marshall Aid" of 32 million francs.

VJ: Part of approaching this adaptation with no efforts to modernize the story or change context was exactly this. James Bond is a product of a specific writer in a specific time, for good (mostly) and for bad (the casual sexism and racism). I've always been a reader of history, so that was an aspect of returning to *Casino Royale* that I enjoyed, of putting it into this geopolitical context. And that relationship between Bond and Leiter, Britain and the United States, is even more fully formed in *Live and Let Die*, the next novel.

ES: Follow-up question: is Bond relevant in our current historical moment?

VJ: The thing that resonated with me the most is Bond's place amid a changing world in terms of gender and sex dynamics. We're in a period of time in which the hegemony of the straight, white male is gone, and some straight, white males are now coming aware of this and becoming angry, even violent. To me, that's the fire behind the political rise of certain right-wing movements. Bond is the quintessential representation of that lost hegemony. He's confident, a lover and murderer who never worries about family, only about career. He does what needs done without concern for others. There's something idealistic and powerful in there, and also something outdated and ugly. I didn't want to approach this book pretending that the ugly stuff isn't there.

ES: In *Casino Royale*, Mathis tells Bond to "Surround yourself with human beings, my dear James. They are easier to fight for than principles [...] But don't let me down and become human yourself. We would lose such a wonderful machine" (2003, 105). Do you see Bond existing as both human and machine? Is this tension part of his struggle and part of what makes him compelling for readers?

VJ: Bond is not one or the other. Not good or bad. He's good and he's bad. Fleming, I think, explored that knowingly. It's at the heart of the interiority in the book. Bond wants to be human but he also wants to be good at his work, and those things do not work well together. It's what makes the end of *Casino Royale* so heartbreaking to me. Bond chooses the path of the machine. But he chooses that not because he is a machine. He chooses it because he's opting to hide his humanity. There's something so tragic in that. Kind of the inverse of *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold*, which I just re-read. In that book, the spy becomes a man and sacrifices his life. In *Casino Royale*, the man becomes a spy, and likely survives because of it. That Mathis quote, and that whole scene, is the heart of the novel. And also another big stretch of text that was a heck of a challenge to translate into comics!

ES: Your adaptation sticks closely to Fleming's novel. Was this a constraint of the publisher and the Fleming estate or something that you wanted to do as well?

VJ: The Fleming estate wanted a direct translation, and that was the only thing that interested me. They have been wonderful partners in this.

ES: Were there changes that you knew you wanted to make?

VJ: While I didn't want to try to water the book down or remove everything that could possibly offend anyone, there were a few specific lines that, to me, were extraneous and went beyond the pale. There's a line of narration that includes the phrase "the sweet tang of rape," and it makes my skin crawl just typing it again here. I didn't want any book out there with my name on it that includes those words. The fact is, we had to change things. We had to trim lots and lots of narration. That practice required making decisions on what to keep, what to lose. So this wasn't simply about looking for offensive bits and cutting them. It was part of an overall process of working with the Fleming estate to preserve the book as best we could while making necessary changes, and part of that process was an ongoing conversation about whether certain lines crossed a line of taste.

ES: In a recent article in *Feminist Theory*, Alex Adams comments on the torture scenes of Fleming's novels: "Fleming's torture scenes represent some of the most potent sites of his negotiations of masculinity, violence, and national identity"

(2017, 155). Adams argues that Bond's survival of torture and rejection of the 'seduction' to betray Britain establishes him as an idealised figure of British masculinity. How do you interpret Fleming's use of torture in *Casino Royale* and how do you think it functions in your adaptation?

VJ: I spent a lot of time figuring out how to visually represent Bond having his manhood pummeled, which is certainly the most I've winced while writing comics. I'm twisting in my seat now. I don't know what Fleming intended to represent, but I do see that scene as part of the overall whole of this novel, which is Fleming grappling with what it means to be a man. Fleming himself saw horrors of war, horrors beyond anything I've known or could imagine. Reading the book, I see an author struggling to make sense of government, of sanctioned murder, of what it means to be a man. It's one of the most intense scenes in literature, and it is an obvious metaphor, almost absurdly so. Le Chiffre is trying to shatter the concept of Western masculinity itself – the testicles make the man and the man makes the state. Why does Bond reject the torture? He rejects it because he's the hero. Ultimately, I think it's as simple as that.

ES: With all of the cultural incarnations of Bond that audiences have encountered by the twenty-first century, it's nice to go back to this first novel and especially the early descriptions of this character and his skills as an agent. I think most people think "guns and girls" when they think of Bond, but in *Casino Royale* much of the novel focuses on gambling and Bond's skill at the table. Do you think "Bond as gambler" works as an analog to him as a British Secret Service agent? In other words, why do you think Fleming used the setting and action of a casino for this spy novel?

VJ: Fleming used the setting because he was familiar with it. Both from his own exploits, but mainly because, if lore is to be believed, this story is a riff on an actual mission. It's a writer writing what he knows. His gambling is really out of character, if anything. That is, he isn't a risky guy, playing hunches. He's always analyzing, always crunching odds in his head. I love the book in that it's really the only Bond novel that predates gadgets and weird villain lairs and all those tropes. It's singular, a shockingly small novel that feels un-Bond-like, which to me makes it a great way for readers to discover Bond all over again.

ES: Fleming gives his readers signs foreshadowing Vesper's betrayal. He refers to her as a "bitch" in the hotel room and then as a "silly bitch" after she's kidnapped.

There are also the sleeping pills in her bedroom acting like Chekhov's gun waiting to go off. How did you approach these (or other) moments of foreshadowing in your adaptation? Do you see them as adding useful suspense to the narrative?

VJ: I definitely called out those moments. Writing comics is really writing a letter to the artist, so in dialogue with Dennis, I pointed out those things, provided the context for them and tried to give them the right prominence. Honestly, I downplayed them a little. In the novel, they're fairly direct, to the point that it doesn't seem much of a surprise when the ending plays itself out.

ES: Are there any parts of Fleming's prose style that you particularly admire?

VJ: Well, for one thing, Fleming can describe a meal like no one else. He's direct, never flowery. Not as terse as Hemingway, but in that vein, a bit more erudite. It's an easy read, but tense. He'll ramp up a scene, get you really racing forward, then slam the breaks with a staccato sentence that hits like a burst of gun fire. The deeper I dug into his work, the more I respected him as a craftsman.

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