

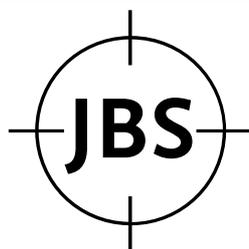
An Interview with Anthony Horowitz

IAN KINANE

Anthony Horowitz is the bestselling author of the *Alex Rider* spy series for children as well as two James Bond continuation novels, *Trigger Mortis* (2015) and *Forever and a Day* (2018). He is also the author of the Sherlock Holmes continuation novels *The House of Silk* (2011) and *Moriarty* (2014), and is responsible for creating two of Britain's best-loved television series, *Midsomer Murders* (1997-present) and *Foyle's War* (2002-2015).

Ian Kinane: Can you provide some background information on how you came to be involved in writing the James Bond continuation novels.

Anthony Horowitz: I have had a lifelong affinity with James Bond and an affection for the books which goes back to my very early years. I was ten years old when I saw the film *Dr. No* (1962) for the first time. Bond has very much been part of my intellectual and creative life. I read Fleming's books at an early age and then loved watching the films with Sean Connery and Roger Moore. In my twenties, or perhaps a little later, I had the inspiration to write a sort of teenaged version of James Bond. My thought process was that, at the time, Roger Moore was too old for the part. He was fifty-seven in his final Bond movie, *A View to a Kill* (1985). I was pursuing a career as a children's author and my books weren't doing terribly well. After having an initial idea of a junior spy, a sort of junior James Bond, I wrote the first of the *Alex Rider* books, *Stormbreaker* (2000), which, I



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was very clear with from the start, was inspired and informed by the James Bond films – although I tried to make my character as different from Bond as I could. There are certain things teenagers and children can get away with or do that adults can't. This is what initially brought me to the attention of the Ian Fleming estate, who is very carefully watching what people are doing with secret agents and spies. And so I met with Corinne Turner (the literary manager of the Ian Fleming estate) a few times and we got on very well. Nothing materialised at first. There was one upset along the way: my Chinese publishers accidentally produced 50,000 *Alex Rider* books with the number "007" on the cover. This, of course was an infringement of the copyright of the Fleming estate, so all 50,000 copies had to be pulped, unfortunately.

At this same time, I was talking regularly in schools and around the country about Bond, acknowledging what elements of the Bond franchise I had borrowed and what aspects I had used and adapted (in the *Alex Rider* series). Suddenly, one day, the estate announced that they were going to do a new Bond continuation novel, and to my great dismay they chose Sebastian Faulks to write it. I say "dismay" only because I had always wanted to write Bond, to write one of the feature films, or to just be involved in that world in some way. My *Alex Rider* series was very much a "well if you won't let me I'll do it anyway" sort of thing. The estate did two more continuation novels after this, by Jeffrey Deaver (*Carte Blanche*, 2012) and William Boyd (*Solo*, 2013), and I began writing articles in newspapers where I would mention almost *en passant* that I wanted to write one and that they should ask me. I sort of made this publicly known, but that's what I really wanted to do. Six years ago or so, I got a phone call asking if I'd like to come in and suddenly, rat number four, there I was.

IK: What does a usual day of work look like for you when you sit down to write? Describe your writing process.

AH: Well, it's very much the same as all my other writing projects, in a sense. I use the word "immersion" an awful lot when I talk about writing a book. I immerse myself so completely in the project. So, if I'm writing a Bond novel, I am hearing Bond, I am seeing Bond, I am inside that world. I sort of have a sense of everything that is Bond. So, I am aware of the colours, the smells, the textures, the cars, the women, the cocktails, the food – all of it. The process becomes more than just writing: it becomes a sort of living inside the book, which is, I

think, the pleasure of writing a continuation novel. It gives you the opportunity, as a writer, to be closer to Bond than anybody in the world because you are in the same book with him.

With respect to my actual daily schedule when writing a Bond novel, I will wake up at 7 o'clock in the morning, and my first thoughts will always be "What is going to happen to Bond? Where is he? Where did I leave him the night before? Is he tied to a chair? Is he driving somewhere? Is he in bed with somebody? What is he about to do? What am I about to do with him?" And so then it's up to my office. By this stage you know you are sort of in the middle of the process. I mean, I know what's happening in the book – not all of it, but pretty much every bit of it. Perhaps I might not know exactly what a particular piece of action might look like. So, for instance, Bond might be tied to a chair about to be tortured. I will then devise and plan out the means by which he'll be tortured. That sort of detail. And I will make notes, having done my research. I'll get together a good sense of what I am about to write and then I will write it. And the next thing I know, it will be night. I am probably still there, writing. It's not like that every day. I mean, there are walks with the dog; there are meetings with people; there are lunches – all of the other sorts of things that drag me away. But on a good day, I just sit there and write.

IK: How do you manage the balance of retaining elements of the Bond franchise which fans will recognise and appreciate with delivering new twists to that formula?

AH: Well, that's the whole trick. I mean, on the one hand, you've got to be 100% faithful to what Fleming has done and not tear the envelope – or, at least, not rip it too much. I mean, you can gently probe it and you might even crack it a little bit, but you cannot tear down the parameters. So, for example: I wouldn't stop Bond smoking. I mean, in the novel *Thunderball* (1961), he does think briefly of cutting back a little bit, or he goes down to a lighter brand of Morlands. But, broadly speaking, Bond smokes. He doesn't *not* drink; he hasn't been on "Dry January". Similarly, his attitude to women is always going to be very sexualised; he is always going to look at them in a carnal way. He is not necessarily going to respect them for their intelligence. Or he does. I mean, Bond is not as sexist as people think he is; he does admire intelligence in women and he also very much admires independence. But that is not generally the first thing that attracts him

to them. It'll be the clothes they're wearing, the shape of their bodies, their eyes, their face. Those are the kinds of rules you don't break. And you have to live with them.

The relationship with M, for instance, is profoundly important. They were always my favourite scenes in the books and in the films. I loved Bernard Lee, and I think Judi Dench did a good job. But, to a certain extent, the Bond films did break faith with Fleming by taking Judi Dench out of the office in search of action. I suspect that is because the actor herself got fed up just doing three scenes at the beginning of the film and wanted a little bit more to do. But, to me, that was breaking faith with the formula, and I wouldn't have done it myself. So I play with those kinds of scenes, and the relationships between the characters, trying to get them right. You have to have the essentials, but then you have to create original stories.

For example, you would look for arenas where Bond has never been before, or push the envelope a little bit by giving Bond a gay friend, which I did in *Trigger Mortis*. This is an example of where I took Fleming's homophobia – which is alleged, and, I fear, occasionally visible in the books – and played around with it a bit, just like I took a particular character trope, the “sidekick”, and played around with that. You do that with the girls, as well. I don't call them “girls”. No-one is calling them “women” or “the female love interest”. One has to be very careful about the word one chooses.

A good example of my pushing the envelope on Fleming's formula with respect to Bond's women is in *Forever and a Day* with Madame Sixtine: Bond attempts to drag her into bed and she puts a hand to him and says “you do not do that until I say that it's okay to do that”. And that's very much a twenty-first century take on an old trope. What Fleming does you can no longer get away with in the twenty-first century.

IK: On that point, can you speak to James Bond's place or role within the #MeToo era? How do you reconcile the facets of Fleming's highly sexist fictive universe with crafting a continuation Bond story in the modern era, where sexist conduct has come under increased scrutiny?

AH: I do not necessarily see these two things as being mutually exclusive. Whenever the question of a female Bond or Bond and female empowerment arises, I always think of Modesty Blaise in the 1960s. This character borrowed heavily from Fleming and from Bond, and she is a wonderful character just waiting to be made into a film heroine. There was one film, *Modesty Blaise* (1966), directed by Joseph Losey, but it was a total mess, a catastrophe. It could have put paid to the whole *Modesty Blaise* franchise. There are, I think, ten or eleven books in the *Modesty Blaise* series and they're wonderful; I love them.

In terms of your question, I broadly support everything that is happening in the world with respect to #MeToo. I certainly support the fact that women can feel empowered and don't feel they need to be victims – to be simply dead bodies in television shows and carnal objects in books. I believe that we have to rethink these things.

But, that said: Bond does demand certain tropes and one of these is sexuality. And the women in the books are probably going to sleep with him – not certainly; Gala Brand in *Moonraker* (1955) didn't – but they are probably going to go to bed with him. And I think it is perfectly easy to square that circle, to have strong women who give Bond a run for his money. Both of the women in my Bond novels, Jeopardy Lane in *Trigger Mortis* and Madame Sixtine in *Forever and a Day*, rescue Bond pretty repeatedly, actually. And he certainly would not succeed without their help. They run rings around him. Both women surrender to him on their own terms, which seems to me to satisfy both worlds. Had I created a character in a James Bond novel who was a lesbian, who had been raped by her uncle, and had she, within three chapters of meeting him, jumped into bed with Bond, I would be pilloried – and rightly so. I think that Fleming could have a Pussy Galore in the Fifties, but I certainly could not create her now. She is a work of genius, though, and one of my favourite Bond “associates”. “Associate” is a terrible word, but I try to avoid labeling the women in these books as possessions of Bond.

IK: It is unusual for one author to be at the helm of two major literary franchises – James Bond and Sherlock Holmes. How do you balance the competing demands of these literary universes as well as the expectations of the fan bases of each?

AH: They are two separate worlds. It's like the difference between writing a children's book and writing for adults; they don't meet. There is no conflict. When I'm writing Sherlock Holmes I am immersed in that world with its own rules and its own challenges. And when I am writing Bond it has its own separate world, its own fan base, and is altogether something quite different. The only thing they have in common is that they are two of the greatest, most iconic characters in literature and to be entrusted with both of them is something quite special. But the rules for each remain the same. I have already mentioned that there are certain things I could never do to Bond (he could never give up smoking or women). Similarly, there are certain things I would never do to Holmes: I would never give him a girlfriend, for instance. For Holmes, there was only ever Irene Adler. Doyle has told us this. It would be an impertinence on my behalf to suggest otherwise.

Same with the Holmes-Watson friendship. Many people speculate that they are gay or that they are asexual. It is simply an Edwardian friendship and that is a very special thing. It's one of the greatest friendships in literature, in my view. You don't play with that. For my money, *Sherlock* the television series (2010-present) went right off the rails with the suggestion that Mary Morton was a CIA assassin, because that is breaking faith with the original. It's the same with those continuation novels in which Holmes meets Queen Victoria. Well, it is a rule that Doyle never put real people into his stories; he mentions them very occasionally (every Duke and Duchess who knocks on the door at 221b Baker Street is made up). So, Sherlock Holmes meets Queen Victoria, meets Jack the Ripper, meets Tarzan, meets Hitler. It's absurd. I wouldn't read these books because they have broken faith with Doyle.

IK: There has been much discussion within literary criticism as to the ways in which the Bond character has been adapted from one political climate to another, and we have seen this over the years in the various transformations from actor to actor, and from writer to writer. Where do you see Bond going next?

AH: I think it's important to make a distinction between Bond of the books and Bond of the films, first of all, because the Bond of the books is very different to the Bond of the films. They're not really connected; they exist in totally different dimensions. With respect to the films, the short answer to the question is that I don't know, and I worry about commenting because people seem to get quite

easily stressed out by other people commenting on the future direction of the films, in any way at all. I would say, broadly, that Bond has adapted brilliantly to every single decade in which he has appeared. If you look at the first two films, *Dr. No* and *From Russia with Love* (1963), they absolutely take the pulse of Britain in the Sixties when they came out, the sense of national identity, the rationing that was still in place after the war. In the aftermath of the war, Britain is trying to come back from the edge and to find a national identity for itself. We'd won the war, but the next ten years or so suggested that we weren't all that great.

But then you get into the Roger Moore era and suddenly you leave the climate of Fleming's books long behind and you move into the realm of absurd gadgets and ludicrous puns. But, at the same time, everybody loved them. You know that there are those moments in certain Bond films which absolutely capture a certain spirited feeling. A good example is the opening sequence to *The Spy who Loved Me* (1977), where Bond skis off a rock cliff and his parachute unfurls to reveal a Union Jack. I remember the crowd in the cinema watching that moment with utter jubilation. But the Union Jack has such different connotations nowadays that I am not sure that scene would play any more. In the Seventies, though, it was exactly the right moment for it. Another example: Margaret Thatcher turning up in *For Your Eyes Only* (1981) and debriefing Bond is a scene that would make one squirm nowadays, but everyone at the time thought it was wonderful. One of the most perfect Bond films is *Casino Royale* (2006), which had its finger exactly on the pulse with regards to peoples' cynicism towards the Bond films. That moment where the bartender asks "Shaken or stirred, sir?" and Bond says "Do I look like I give a damn?" – it's a wonderful line that absolutely nails how we saw the Bond films, then.

Moving forward, whether the films will sustain their relevance into the next incarnation of the character, whatever that may be, I don't know. The books are easier because the books don't need to change. Jeffrey Deaver wrote a Bond novel set in the current times, which would make Bond terribly old if we're being realistic about it all, and which, I think personally, was a mistake. I think the Bond in literature is tied to his period very much more so than the films. He is a man of the Fifties and Sixties, a man of the Cold War.

IK: What do you imagine the role of literary criticism to be in the James Bond phenomenon? Do you see criticism working in tandem with or against the literature it addresses?

AH: I think, with respect to Bond, there is a great deal, although a finite amount, of study to be done on the Bond novels. The novels are extraordinary. I think people have forgotten how well-written they are, how unique they are, and how much they have in them. Fleming laid the foundations for all other spy fiction – whether it's Le Carré who is deliberately writing against him, or others who try very hard to be like him. Just as we learn about late Victorian England from Sherlock Holmes, so, I think, we learn an awful lot about the Cold War from James Bond. Fleming doesn't necessarily tell us much about architecture or politics, or what you might call "street furniture", but he does give us a lot of attitude. There is a lot of attitude in the Bond novels and there is a great deal of pleasure, and I think that does repay literary criticism. The books have created a vast industry. It is famously said that over half the world's population has seen a James Bond film, and certainly it is true that people go a little mad when talking about Bond. I think something happens. And that is a phenomenon worth looking at. Certainly the first six of Fleming's novels, at least, are interesting to look at. You can see Fleming's enthusiasm for the character wane towards the latter end of the books, as he is desperately searching for a way to rekindle the spark. There is a lot to be studied in them.

IK: Does literary criticism play a part in your life? Do you read or respond to criticism of your own writing?

AH: Well, the only people who have written about me are critics in newspapers and I don't tend to read those – except the ones my publisher sends me, which are usually the worst ones. I'm not sure that anyone would consider my books to be worthy of study, worthy of more than, shall we say, a tweet. But, at the same time, I'm not sure I'd necessarily disagree with that. I get nervous when my books are studied in schools, for example. I'm not quite sure that's the aim of them. I write them to entertain, not necessarily to inform. I'm not sure whether the contents of my books would repay literary criticism. Certainly no one has written a continuation novel as good as the originals. Perhaps Kingsley Amis writing as Robert Markham comes closest with *Colonel Sun* (1968).