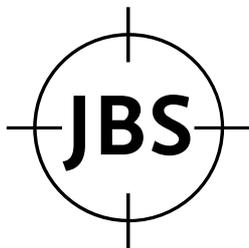


***Ian Fleming and the Politics of Ambivalence*, by Ian Kinane**

(Bloomsbury Academic, 2021, pp. 244)

STEPHEN WATT

In a moment of prescience in the introduction of *Ian Fleming and the Politics of Ambivalence*, Ian Kinane anticipates the possibility of confusion – or, dare I say, some variety of *ambivalence* – arising from the title of his book. About what or whom was Ian Fleming so ambivalent? Lots of things, as it turns out. The opening pages of this fine study productively complicate the term “ambivalence”, and the chapters that follow delineate several of the issues – and people(s) – about which and whom Fleming was sharply divided: “his simultaneous attraction and disdain toward the prospect of Britain’s decolonization of Jamaica” (4), for instance, and his mixed feelings about America’s “rising influence in geopolitical affairs” as Britain’s stature was tumbling into decline (53). In these and other matters, Jamaica occupies a position of privilege both in Fleming’s writing and Kinane’s argument, as he stipulates at the outset: “*Ian Fleming and the Politics of Ambivalence* is the first book-length literary-critical study of the representation of Jamaica in Fleming’s work” (2). As is the case with the book’s title, this phrasing is important, as his project is *not* a biography of Fleming’s life on and fascination with Jamaica; that is, an account typically based on an archive of personal documents, interviews with family and friends, and so on. Instead, as a “literary-crit-



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ical study” of Fleming’s *representation* of the postwar Caribbean, Kinane spends much of his time – and profitably so – engaged with the three James Bond novels set in Jamaica: *Live and Let Die* (1954), *Dr. No* (1958), and *The Man with the Golden Gun* (1965). In this context and in these novels, such historical developments as the changing political climate of the Cold War era, specifically decolonisation and the waning of British influence in geopolitical affairs, grow in importance, and the site most revelatory of these is Jamaica.

Jamaica is thus the provenience of what are at times vexing contradictions for Fleming and readers alike. And political sea-changes in the postwar era are not the only sources of such oppositions; on the contrary, perhaps the most debated of Fleming’s ambivalences concerns race and, in turn, accusations of racism that have long dogged Fleming’s representation of non-white Others. As Kinane notes, Fleming’s “perceived racism has become so essential to contemporary considerations of his work, so embedded within the collective critical consciousness of the James Bond universe” (87), that it must be confronted. And Kinane does: “[t]o be clear, the book does not make the case that Fleming is anything other than what he was: a *casual racist*” (1; my emphasis). In later readings of Fleming’s fiction, he usefully discusses various manifestations of this casual racialism: Bond’s inability in *Live and Let Die* to discern the particularities of black faces in dimly lit spaces, for example, or M’s unfortunate aside in *Dr. No* that “sex and machete fights are about all [the Jamaicans] know” (86). At the same time, Fleming *and* Bond’s affection for Caribbean people counter instances in the novels of a “dismissive racism” (53); so, too, do Quarrel’s healing ministrations and tutelage of Bond in *Live and Let Die* in his role as a “symbolic *paterfamilias*” and “paternal protector” (76). Still, the allegations of racism are so numerous, so frequently exfoliated in exegeses of the Bond novels, that they must be scrutinised in the three chapters that follow, each of which focuses upon one of the novels mentioned above, and in the concluding chapter “After Fleming: Jamaica on Screen”.

Kinane’s readings produce what are at times brilliant extensions of the theoretical issues outlined in the introduction. There, a brief review of psychoanalytic understandings of “ambivalence” gives way to a more considered discussion of the ambivalence inherent to colonialism as theorised by Homi Bhabha, Anne McClintock, and others. For Bhabha in *The Location of Culture* (1994), the “colonial presence is always ambivalent [...] characterized, on the one hand, by mastery, and, on the other, by displacement and fantasy” (4). Similarly, Fleming’s view of a “mediatized” Jamaica, a “topographical hybrid construct, [is] forged in equal parts from the author’s local experiences of the island [...] and his con-

cerns, anxieties and desirous projections for its future” (11). These “desirous projections”, of course, involved more than imperial decline, nationhood, or decolonisation; and both in a later section of the introduction (“Fleming, Orientalism, and the Jamaican Exotic”) and throughout, Kinane identifies “desirous” cathexes directed toward non-white or other colonised subjects: the exotic African-American nightclub dancer in *Live and Let Die*, for example, whose performance transfixes Bond, and the “frankness” and “lack of shame” about human sexuality he observes that so sharply contrast with “conservative British tastes” (61). Such ambivalence, ably excavated in readings of the novels, leads to larger questions: for example, how does one explain the enduring popularity of the Bond film franchise if, in fact, Fleming and his famous “double-0” agent (not the same person, as Kinane emphasises) are deemed to be racists? Are British filmgoers racists as well, or do they fail to recognise their own racism, always-already embedded in the national consciousness? Untangling such knotty issues, Kinane advocates for a “critical reconsideration” of Fleming’s *oeuvre*, which includes a determination of whether his novels are “effigies of political incorrectness” or, instead, evidence of his ability to “transport the reader back to this outmoded period” (89). *Ian Fleming and the Politics of Ambivalence* achieves such a reconsideration.

The readings of both *Live and Let Die* and *Dr. No* are engaging and provocative – the discussion of No’s and Honey Ryder’s different hybridity, and Bond’s “attempted colonial subjugation” (122) of the latter, especially so – and the third chapter on *The Man with the Golden Gun* makes an especially useful contribution. For in his reading of *The Man with Golden Gun*, Kinane makes excellent use of the Fleming Archive at Indiana University’s Lilly Library, quoting from, among other things, correspondence between Fleming and William Plomer. Lest anyone infer from this archival work that Kinane embarks upon the biographical study he vowed to eschew, such is not the case. Instead, positioning Jamaica in the critical foreground allows for an innovative reading of the novel Fleming once derided as a “stupid book” (an aesthetic verdict not without merit). It does so at least in part, in Kinane’s view, by Fleming’s withholding “from the reader any insight into Bond’s inner psychological and emotional life”, with the result that, in the end, “Jamaica is what matters” (131), especially its newly gained independence. And from its opening pages, the novel suggests its author’s ambivalence about this fact: on the one hand, the book serves as a “barely coded endorsement of Britain’s continued surveillance of its former Jamaican colony”; on the other, Fleming opens *The Man with the Golden Gun* “with an unmistakably

scathing reproach of Britain's imperial politics" through Bond's "face-off" with M (129). This division aside, the novel shows in subtle ways how the political landscape of the British-Jamaican relationship has changed; for example, Bond's nemesis Scaramanga travels throughout the Caribbean almost blithely, while "the colonial power of Britain", represented by Bond's limited freedom of access and mobility, is "no longer accommodated" (132). In these and other ways, ambivalence about Jamaica, the fascinating throughline of Kinane's argument, elevates the importance of a novel that, for most readers, marks "something of a nadir in the Bond canon (leaving aside the altogether derisible *The Spy Who Loved Me*)" (129).

One of the great strengths of Ian Kinane's project in *Ian Fleming and the Politics of Ambivalence*, then, is that its critical focus enables him to formulate first-rate readings of the global and racial politics of Fleming's fiction. These readings continue in the brief last chapter "After Fleming: Jamaica on Screen", which comes as something of a surprise given this title. "*After Fleming: Jamaica On Screen*", that is, suggests a consideration of films from the 1970s and after, perhaps after the filmic adaptation of *The Man with Golden Gun* in 1974, or those that exhibit the influence of Fleming's representation of the Caribbean. When first reading the title in the Table of Contents, my mind wandered to the emergence of reggae in popular culture and to Perry Henzel's film *The Harder They Come* (1972), starring Jimmy Cliff, and *Babylon* (1980), which admittedly has more to say about Brixton than Kingston, where Henzel's film is set. But Kinane's brief conclusion does not, in fact, discuss films other than adaptations of Fleming's Bond novels, particularly *Dr. No* and *Live and Let Die*. Here, he scrutinises differences between the novels and film scripts to great effect, amplifying both the political and racial ambivalences described earlier. His close examination of the filmic Quarrel in *Dr. No*, for example, is especially incisive, as he both echoes and amplifies James Chapman's thesis that a character in the novel who "commands Bond's respect" is reduced on screen to a "menial sidekick" (154-55). At the same time, he also forcefully argues that Fleming's novel creates an "ambivalent ethnoscape", a space in which "racial tensions" are "deliberately" minimised (157).

But my complaint about the title of Kinane's coda is, in the end, so much small beer. *Ian Fleming and the Politics of Ambivalence* makes a major contribution to our understanding of Fleming's thought. As such, it is a most welcome addition to a growing body of thoughtful literary and cultural criticism of his work.