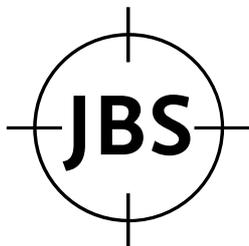


“The Texan with whom he had shared so many adventures”

Reassessing the Role of Felix Leiter in Fleming’s Bond Novels

N.F. HARTVELT

While the name Felix Leiter undoubtedly rings fewer bells than that of his friend James Bond, Leiter has been part of the Bond franchise since its inception in Ian Fleming’s *Casino Royale* (1953), and was most recently portrayed by Jeffrey Wright in *No Time To Die* (2021). In an interview with Wright, *Fatherly* leads with the following: “Making his triumphant return to the world of James Bond [...] he’s back for a third time playing CIA agent Felix Leiter, the man who is James Bond’s best friend” (Britt 2021). In a similar vein, but with a different tone, an article in the *New York Times* before the release of *Die Another Day* (2002) supposed that “[d]ie-hard James Bond fans will probably be weeping in their vodka martinis [...]. Once again, a defining element of the 007 film franchise [...] will be absent. No it’s not Sean Connery. It’s Felix Leiter” (Vinciguerra 2002). Keeping Leiter’s nationality in mind, it is perhaps unsurprising that this sentiment should be expressed in an American newspaper. The article goes on to note that Leiter’s “presence – or lack of it – makes him a valuable barometer of the geopolitical climate that surrounds him” (ibid.). In other words, his presence or absence can be read as a measure of the (political, cultural, economic) Special Relationship between the United States and the United Kingdom. While the cinematic Leiter has been read as such in relation to Bond, attention to his character beyond this political reading has been limited, especially regarding his presence in the Fleming novels.



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The cause of this comparative neglect of the literary Leiter might be traced to Kingsley Amis's *James Bond Dossier*. Amis was among the first to treat Fleming's Bond novels with any kind of academic rigour, thereby defending genre fiction. While Amis thus appears attentive to the risks of dismissing things at face value, he is quick to dispense with Leiter as a foil to Bond. Leiter is an "in-substantial figure[]" (1965, 78), existing "merely to give Bond information, pass on his orders, listen to what he says and smooth things over with the American [...] locals" (ibid., 79). Ultimately, Amis concludes that

[t]he point of Felix Leiter, such a nonentity as a piece of characterization, is that he, the American, takes orders from Bond, the Britisher, and that Bond is constantly doing better than he, showing himself, not braver or more devoted, but smarter, wiler, tougher, more resourceful, the incarnation of little old England with her quiet ways and shoe-string budget wiping the eye of great big global-tentacled multi-billion-dollar-appropriating America. (ibid., 90)

In this oft-quoted passage, Amis reduces Leiter to a measure of the Anglo-American relationship, which he reads as one in which post-war Britain has to be dominant to defend its pride. It seems as if Leiter has never recovered from this damning assessment, and if one accepts Amis's view of him as a "nonentity as a piece of characterization" then critical inquiry beyond Leiter's role as American foil to Britain's Bond is impaired if not dead before it starts.

Critics after Amis have written about Leiter, but tend to focus on his role as representative of the US and CIA. For instance, in the key publication *The Politics of James Bond*, Jeremy Black does not engage with Leiter's character much, but does note that in *Casino Royale* he "provides [money] without difficulty and is happy to rely on Bond's skill, suggesting a far smoother working of the Anglo-American alliance than was in fact the case" (2001, 7). Black reads Leiter as representative of this alliance, in a broader reading of the novels as dramatising Britain's post-war crises (Suez and decolonisation, for instance) and overall weakness in relation to a flourishing America (ibid., 47).

Naturally, in the Cold War geopolitical environment in which Fleming wrote the novels, the Anglo-American alliance and its representation are of interest. The recent publication *Geographies, Genders and Geopolitics of James Bond* pays due attention to Leiter, but its focus is the cinematic Bond franchise. Lisa Funnell and Klaus Dodds note, about the literary Leiter, that he is "the 'good American'", but the US "and its inhabitants appear uncooperative, surly, and even

jealous of Bond's fieldwork skills" (2017, 7). Funnell and Dodds refer to Amis's description of Leiter as a "non-entity", but they also suggest that James Chapman "writes more sympathetically" about the relationship between Bond and Leiter (ibid., 48) in his *Licence to Thrill*. Chapman's description is hardly sympathetic, however, as he suggests that

[t]he professional and personal friendship between Bond and Leiter represents the 'special relationship' which has supposedly existed between Britain and the United States since the end of the Second World War, though, in a quaint reversal of the real balance of power, it is the American Leiter who is the subordinate partner to the British Bond. (1999, 39)

Thereafter, Chapman immediately cites Amis on Leiter and likewise reduces him to what he represents in the Special Relationship. This same move occurs in Tony Bennett and Janet Woollacott's *Bond and Beyond*, citing Amis's paragraph twice in agreement and concluding that "Leiter's role is always structurally subordinated to that of Bond" (1987, 100). Clearly, both older and more recent publications employ a reading of Leiter as representative of the US to argue that the novels' portrayal of the Special Relationship is unrealistic, as it fails to acknowledge that after WWII, the US (and not the UK) was the prime political and economic power. Whether or not Leiter is set apart from his countrymen as a "good" American, these publications fail to account for Fleming's Leiter as more than a slate onto which to project the status of America. This article counters this tendency in Bond scholarship. Rather than reading the relationship between Leiter and Bond as a solely political one, it instead reads it first and foremost as a friendship, which in turn influences the political relationship between the men, and the countries and organisations for which they work.

Scholarship on Leiter's role in the Fleming novels is limited. While Funnell and Dodds focus on the films, they state that "[a]s a character, Leiter occupies an important place in the Bond novels even if literary critics at the time were divided on his significance" (48). Fleming's contemporary critics do not seem "divided" on Leiter's significance, however. Early publications that discuss the novels include Amis's *Dossier*, and Umberto Eco's *Bond Affair* and O.F. Snelling's *James Bond: A Report*. Whereas Amis reads Leiter as a measure of Anglo-American relations, Eco dismisses Leiter more generally: by omission. Eco sets out a scheme of eight moves to which all Bond novels adhere, or so he argues. This scheme features Bond, M, Villain, and Woman as "players", with no

mention of further friends or enemies. Eco performs a demonstrative reading of *Diamonds Are Forever*, plotting out the novel and differentiating between “fundamental moves” and a “multiplicity of side issues” (1994, 157). Leiter is mentioned only three times as part of these side issues (ibid., 158-159), which are the events in the novel that do not “alter[] the basic scheme” or the main plot points (ibid., 157). Failing to account for Leiter in the “fundamental moves” seems to belie his presence in *Diamonds Are Forever*, and while Eco calls Leiter Bond’s “friend” (ibid., 159) he fails to further probe into that classification. Snelling instead notes that Bond does not seem to have “very many friends. [...] He does get on pretty well with Felix Leiter, that unfortunate American shamus, whenever they happen to meet on a job [...] I imagine that they would soon sicken of each other’s company if they had a great deal of it” (1964, 30-31). Amis goes further still when he suggests that “[i]f there is a Bond-friend figure he appears in the books from which [Leiter and Mathis] are absent” (79). One of Amis’s candidates for the role is *From Russia with Love*’s Darko Kerim, who is present as Bond’s Istanbul guide but “partly too, perhaps, to provide a human glow and a kind of energy that Bond lacks” (79). While Kerim may provide the energy Bond cannot, this does not necessarily make him his friend. Leiter, on the other hand, manages to awaken – much to Captain Dexter’s chagrin in the opening pages of *Live and Let Die* – an “unprofessional ebullience” in Bond himself (Fleming 2012d, 10). Leiter may not distract from Bond’s adventures as Amis argues Kerim does, but he is instead Bond’s partner in them: Bond thinks about Leiter as “[t]he Texan with whom he had shared so many adventures” (ibid., 186).

That is the line that goes through Bond’s mind as he looks at Leiter, who has been gravely injured in a shark attack (courtesy of one of Mr Big’s henchmen) in *Live and Let Die*. Raymond Benson, who authored not only the *James Bond Bedside Companion* but also several continuation Bond novels, points out that the manuscript of *Live and Let Die* has Leiter dying from the attack, and he indicates that it may have been Fleming’s American agent, Naomi Burton, who protested and encouraged Fleming to let Leiter live (2012, n.p.). While it may seem attractive to count this as an argument for Leiter’s irrelevance, Leiter has considerable presence in *Diamonds Are Forever*, the next novel in which he appears, and he appears in three further novels. Benson notes Leiter’s significance to Bond throughout the novels, and writes briefly about their friendship, which “is important to both men; this is apparent in their conversation and actions” (ibid., n.p.).

What most publications are inattentive to is that the relationship between Bond and Leiter is not only political, but also personal. Those that are attentive

to this mostly dismiss Leiter as a candidate for a friend of Bond's. These appraisals miss, or misread, Leiter's presence and character in the novels. This article aims to build further on Benson's reading of Leiter and thereby fill a lacuna in (literary) Bond scholarship, by focusing firstly on the way in which Leiter is characterised in the novels, and secondly on his relationship – both personal and political – with Bond. This article does not seek to deny that the novels, through Bond and Leiter, comment on the geopolitical Anglo-American relationship, but instead examines how the novels' political statement is driven by the friendship between the two men. In doing so, the article offers a corrective to the standard scholarly narratives about Leiter in the Fleming novels.

CHARACTERISING LEITER

This section will demonstrate, *contra* Amis, that Leiter's character is soundly established in the Fleming novels. Prior to doing so, the focus on these novels needs to be justified. Bennett (2017) argues that the figure of the popular hero James Bond is constructed through various texts, and that the figure of Bond is not stable between these texts (novels, films, fanzines, interviews with actors, etc.): Bond is not fixed, but transforms through the influence of social and cultural ideologies. The same could be said, although not to the same extent, for Felix Leiter, who likewise moves through various texts, and whose character is infamous for having been portrayed by seven different actors in ten Eon films.¹ Bennett's argument about Bond partly applies to Leiter, and in discussing only the six Fleming novels in which he appears, the scope of this article is limited, but necessarily so: this focus addresses a gap in (literary) Bond scholarship and thereby hopes to achieve a fuller understanding of the Bond and Leiter phenomena.²

The majority of the novels are narrated by a third-person narrator, often (but not always) focalised through Bond.³ This means that the narrator's observa-

1 Felix Leiter is played by Jack Lord in *Dr No* (1962), Cec Linder in *Goldfinger* (1964), Rik Van Nutter in *Thunderball* (1965), Norman Burton in *Diamonds Are Forever* (1971), David Hedison in *Live and Let Die* (1973) and *Licence to Kill* (1989), John Terry in *The Living Daylights* (1987) and Jeffrey Wright in *Casino Royale* (2006), *Quantum of Solace* (2008) and *No Time to Die* (2021) in ten Eon films, and additionally by Michael Pate in the 1954 *Casino Royale* and Bernie Casey in the 1983 *Never Say Never Again*.

2 Leiter is absent from other Fleming texts, excepting two mentions in "007 in New York".

3 Exceptions are, for instance, *The Spy Who Loved Me*; the section in *Thunderball* that describes SPECTRE (partly focalised through Blofeld); or M's readings of case files or two early chapters of *The Man with the Golden Gun* which M focalises. There are also

tions tend to be inflected by Bond's views, (sensory) experiences, thoughts, and everything he can know and possibly notice. Part of the suspense of the novels derives from this. For example, up until Bond's discovery of Goldfinger's hidden camera, he does not know he is being recorded: his discovery confirms Bond's suspicions about Goldfinger (Fleming 2012c, 166-167). Much of the narrative is action-oriented, meaning the text relates what Bond and other characters do, where they go, and what they eat, but moments in which Bond is "introspecti[ve]" are "rare" (Halloran 2005, 164). When Bond thinks about other characters, such moments of reflection are therefore marked and lend themselves for careful examination. Statements the novels make about characters are not neutral or objective, but instead inflected by Bond's focalisation and thus his opinions.

Bond's first introduction to Felix Leiter in *Casino Royale* comes through Mathis, the local French agent: "Felix Leiter. He's the CIA chap from Fontainebleau. [...] He looks okay. May come in useful" (Fleming 2012a, 33). Initially, Bond and Leiter are set up as foils of each other, with their early interactions suggesting a hint of rivalry, and Amis's claims regarding Leiter's inferiority and subservience to Bond seem plausible here. Bond's first actual meeting with Leiter comes during Bond's winning streak at roulette. One of the "pilot fish" piggybacking on his streak is someone "Bond took to be an American", who "had smiled once or twice across the table, and there was something pointed in the way he duplicated Bond's movements, placing his two modest plaques of ten mille exactly opposite Bond's larger ones" (ibid., 55). Leiter is set up as Bond's lesser double, winning only because he copies Bond. This starts a hierarchical relationship, which they initially struggle to navigate. After thanking Bond for "the ride", it is Leiter's move, and he invites Bond for a drink (ibid.). Bond then feels the need to reassert initiative, and "insisted on ordering Leiter's Haig-and-Haig" after which he spends almost a page explaining to the barman how to mix his own drink (ibid., 56). After this demonstration of his gastronomic expertise, Bond relaxes: he "laughed", is "delighted" Leiter has joined the ranks, and ultimately indulges in rumination as he "reflected that good Americans were fine people and that most of them seemed to come from Texas" (ibid., 58-59). They have sized each other up here, and while the novels have more moments in which they try to outsmart each other (predominantly in the culinary and automotive realms), these happen in the spirit of friendly playfulness rather than harsh transatlantic rivalry.

brief moments in which other characters' feelings are voiced; yet, the majority of the focalisation happens through Bond.

Only after Bond's reflection on Leiter as a "good American" does the novel properly introduce Leiter:

Felix Leiter was about thirty-five. He was tall with a thin bony frame and his lightweight, tan-coloured suit hung loosely from his shoulders like the clothes of Frank Sinatra. His movements and speech were slow, but one had the feeling that there was plenty of speed and strength in him and that he would be a tough and cruel fighter. As he sat hunched over the table, he seemed to have some of the jack-knife quality of a falcon. There was this impression also in his face, in the sharpness of his chin and cheekbones and the wide wry mouth. His grey eyes had a feline slant which was increased by his habit of screwing them up against the smoke of the Chesterfields which he tapped out of the pack in a chain. The permanent wrinkles which this habit had etched at the corners gave the impression that he smiled more with his eyes than with his mouth. A mop of straw-coloured hair lent his face a boyish look which closer examination contradicted. Although he seemed to talk quite openly about his duties in Paris, Bond soon noticed that he never spoke of his American colleagues in Europe or in Washington and he guessed that Leiter held the interests of his own organization far above the mutual concerns of the North Atlantic Allies. Bond sympathized with him. (ibid., 59)

This description characterises Leiter as someone similar to Bond, and thus as someone whom Bond might understand (and *vice versa*). While outwardly partly dissimilar – Leiter's blonde hair and tan suit versus Bond's black hair and dark blue suits – they are also alike: they are roughly the same age, and have almost the same eye colour.⁴ More importantly, they are similar in terms of character: both are "cruel" fighters. Chapman points out that this adjective is "used most frequently to describe Bond" (2005, 133). Lastly, they have identical feelings regarding their respective organisations, and it is this with which Bond ultimately sympathises.

Leiter's character is further established by being thoroughly Americanised by two references: he dresses like Frank Sinatra, and smokes Chesterfield cigarettes – an American brand. With Bond focalising (which becomes apparent from

4 Leiter is, Bond estimates, roughly thirty-five, and Bond is thirty-seven in *Moonraker* (Fleming 2006, 11). Leiter's eyes are grey; Bond's are "grey-blue" (e.g. Fleming 2012a, 63).

phrases like “Bond soon noticed”), this means Bond is familiar enough with Sinatra, and perhaps American popular culture in general, to make this comparison.⁵ While these references may seem minor, Bond copies some of Leiter’s behaviours in later novels, which further turns any hierarchy – if still present – on its head. Bond starts smoking Chesterfields and drinking Leiter’s Haig-and-Haigs (cf. Fleming 1963, 168; 2012c, 33, 256, 297, 353; 2012d, 104). Bond’s decision to smoke Chesterfields when abroad rather than, for instance, the Luckies that Captain Dexter offers him in *Live and Let Die*, demonstrate the influence Leiter has on Bond’s habits – and Bond is as particular about his cigarettes as he is about the preparation of his dry martini. He smokes “a Balkan and Turkish mixture made for him by Morlands of Grosvenor Street” with “the triple gold band” (Fleming 2012a, 27, 63), which he has been “smoking since his teens” (Fleming 1963, 65). Bond’s predilection for his Morlands is well-known: after Bond (who is presumed KIA) has been brainwashed by the KGB and tries to gain access to M to assassinate him, Major Townsend interviews Bond and tries to trip him up with a “loaded remark – a reference to Bond’s liking for the Morland Specials with the three gold rings” (Fleming 2012e, 8). The cigarettes are, then, one of his defining characteristics, and tracing the changes in Bond’s habits throughout the novels suggests not only the subtle yet lingering influence of Leiter’s character, but also that Leiter’s relationship with Bond is not one whose sole purpose is to show Bond’s superiority.

The initial reference to Sinatra, who was – among other things – a singer who moved in jazz circles, anticipates the major way in which Leiter is characterised. In *Live and Let Die*, Leiter’s interest in jazz music becomes clear: he “[w]rote a few pieces on Dixieland Jazz for the *Amsterdam News*, one of the local papers” (Fleming 2012d, 51). Benson also reflects on Leiter’s love for jazz to counter Amis’s argument about his supposed lack of personality, and points out that Leiter escapes from one of Mr Big’s henchmen by “arguing the finer points of Jazz” with him (ibid., 105). One more occasion shows Leiter’s interest in jazz. In Bond and Leiter’s first meeting in this novel, Leiter surprises Bond by emerging from his bedroom in his hotel, and he mentions “the famous CIA ‘Service With a Smile’” (ibid., 9). This may be no more than a general joke about customer service. However, the quotation marks around the phrase invite further investigation, and Leiter could refer to two things, assuming he was born *circa*

5 Judith Roof discusses James Bond’s (cinematic) fashion and style in relation to the Rat Pack (2005, 81-82), but the novel *Casino Royale* antedates the rise of the Rat Pack in the 1960s.

1916.⁶ The first might be the 1934 US Vitaphone film starring Leon Errol, titled “Service with a Smile”. This short film sees Errol helming a petrol station that is destroyed in a fire, but with the insurance money he (day)dreams up a much improved petrol station including chorus girls that perform, indeed, (car) service with a smile as they sing those words (“Service” 2007). A second, more relevant reference might be the 1937 Betty Boop short, “Service With a Smile”. Betty has just opened the Hi-De-Ho-Tel and receives numerous complaints from her guests, who all call room service. The number of calls overwhelms her; nevertheless, every time she picks up the phone she utters the phrase “[t]his is Betty, service with a smile” (“Betty Boop” 2017). An increasingly desperate Betty is saved by Grampy, who comes up with clever solutions for the guests’ complaints. Betty’s character is clearly linked to the Jazz Age, explaining Leiter’s potential interest in the cartoons, which sometimes featured jazz musicians like Louis Armstrong, Don Redman and Cab Calloway (O’Meally 2004, 279, 295n49). In *Live and Let Die*, Leiter mentions that, among others, Armstrong and Calloway played in the Savoy Ballroom (2012d, 62-63), evincing his interest in them.

After *Live and Let Die*, which Leiter survives despite Fleming’s initial intent to retire him definitively, Leiter changes when he loses one arm and half a leg to a shark. Matthew Sherman suggests that Leiter, in *Diamonds Are Forever*, “represents a disabled America, bearing a hook for a hand and a prosthetic leg” (2019, 146). He is indeed first introduced as such in that novel, and Bond, in another moment of reflection,

added up his impressions. The right arm had gone, and the left leg, and there were imperceptible scars below the hairline above the right eye that suggested a good deal of grafting, but otherwise Leiter looked in good shape. The grey eyes were undefeated, the shock of straw-coloured hair had no hint of grey in it, and there was none of the bitterness of the cripple in Leiter’s face. (2012b, 84-85)

Leiter’s hook does not stop him from driving and shifting gears. It does, however, stop him from getting in on the underwater action in *Thunderball* – until the moment he puts “an extra foot-flipper” on his hook, a tactic he refers to as “[c]ompensation” (1963, 215). In discussing a series of novels in which physical non-normativity is often associated with villainy, it is helpful to differentiate

6 This is based on *Casino Royale*’s publication date of 1952 and Griswold putting its events in 1951 (2006, 13), as well as Bond estimating Leiter’s age to be thirty-five.

between “bad-difference” and “mere-difference” views of disability.⁷ Philosopher Elizabeth Barnes generally defines these two views as follows. The “bad-difference” view suggests that “not only is having a disability a bad thing, having a disability would still be a bad thing even if society was fully accommodating of disabled people”; whereas the mere-difference view holds that “having a disability makes you physically non-standard, but it doesn’t (by itself or automatically) make you worse off” (2016, 55). The way the novels represent Leiter seems to fall in the mere-difference camp, as, after becoming disabled, he is still part of the action as much as (or perhaps even more than) he was prior to this. While his employer, the CIA, is shown not to accommodate Leiter as they only offer him desk work, which he refuses,⁸ the narratives do accommodate him. Perhaps his representation is overly simplified, as Bond’s reflection on Leiter indicates a clear mind-body division which may not really be so straightforward, but nevertheless Leiter overturns Bond’s stereotypes about “the bitterness of the cripple” (Fleming 2012b, 85).

Moreover, Barnes suggests that the mere-difference view of disability “can maintain that the very thing that causes you to lose out on some goods (unique to non-disability) allows you to participate in other goods (perhaps unique to disability)” (57). Benson notes that post-*Live and Let Die* Leiter is “as cheerful and buoyant as ever. Perhaps this conscious negation of his physical handicaps is one reason why Leiter remains a useful friend to Bond” (n.p.). This does not seem to do justice to the novels, as they do engage with Leiter’s disability. He may not be able to swim as well as Bond until he figures out his flipper solution, but Bond reflects that

there was no man like [Leiter] when the chips were down. Although Leiter had only a steel hook instead of a right arm – a memento of one of those assignments – he was one of the finest left-handed one-armed shots in the States and the hook itself could be a devastating weapon at close quarters. (Fleming 2012e, 116)

Leiter becomes, perhaps, an even more “cruel” fighter in close combat by means of his prosthesis that is “unique to [his] disability”.

7 Examples of villains’ non-normative physical features in the novels under discussion include Scaramanga’s third nipple, Largo’s twice-as-big-as-normal hands, Goldfinger’s “football of a head” (Fleming 2012c, 41, 243), both Blofeld’s and Mr Big’s sizes, and Mr Big’s heart condition.

8 The CIA does, however, “[pay Leiter] off handsomely” (Fleming 2012b, 86).

Felix Leiter is perhaps not a very round character, but he is dynamic. His life drastically changes throughout the six novels in which he appears; he changes employers and becomes disabled. The narratives accommodate him, and give him a place alongside Bond. When employed by the CIA, he cares for his organisation and country, and when on a mission is willing to risk his own life and limbs to see the job through. He also has hobbies and distinct tastes: Leiter is certainly characterised to some clear extent.

FRIENDSHIPS, RELATIONSHIPS, AND HOMOSOCIALITY

Leiter furthermore plays an important role in relation to Bond, and their relationship is strong. While Amis's narrative about Leiter's (lack of) character appears to be accepted by many scholars, his notions regarding friendship in the novels are contested by, for instance, Benson. Amis argues that relationships "get a poor showing in the Bond books. Many people in them, from Honeychile Rider to Hugo Drax, make a vivid impression on our mind's eye and ear, but the way they connect up with Bond, and with one another, is obscure, or thin, or just not there" (137). Leiter provides a counterexample to this, though: after their initial meeting in Royale-les-Eaux, they "connect up" whenever Bond jumps the pond and finds himself in the United States and (often) in the Caribbean, and the two men remain steady friends.

Some critics have discussed Leiter and Bond's relationship as friendship – or lack thereof. In the recent *The Many Facets of Diamonds Are Forever*, Grant Hester rebukes any argument in favour of a friendship by claiming Leiter and Bond's relationship is only "a work relationship [...] they are merely familiar business associates who each go their own way at the end of their joint missions" (2019, 102n31). In that same publication, Jennifer Martinsen conversely suggests that "Bond feels genuine affection" for Leiter (2019, 109). Benson outlines friendship as one of the important themes in the novels, and exemplifies by discussing Leiter, "Bond's closest friend outside of England", as they "hit it off as if they have been friends since childhood" (n.p.). This section examines moments at which the relationship between Leiter and Bond is articulated, which not only contributes to understanding Leiter as a potentially round character, but also reflects on how Bond is characterised and humanised through his relationships. This section focuses on the social aspects of their relationship, and in the next section these aspects will be connected to the political facets both implicit and explicit in their relationship.

Leiter's presence in *Casino Royale* is brief, but has left an impact on Bond, which becomes evident in the opening chapter of *Live and Let Die*. Upon arriving at the St Regis in New York, "a strange feeling of loneliness and empty space gripped [Bond's] heart" (Fleming 2012d, 8). This is immediately juxtaposed with Leiter's entrance onto the stage:

"Arranging the flowers by your bed. Part of the famous CIA 'Service With a Smile'". The tall thin young man came forward with a wide grin, his hand outstretched, to where Bond stood rooted with astonishment.

"Felix Leiter! What the hell are you doing here?" Bond grasped the hard hand and shook it warmly. "And what the hell are you doing in my bedroom, anyway? God! It's good to see you. Why aren't you in Paris? Don't tell me they've put you on this job?"

Leiter examined the Englishman affectionately. (ibid., 9)

This joyful expression of "unprofessional ebullience" (ibid., 10), in the thoughts of Captain Dexter (who delivered Bond to his room), sets the tone for Bond and Leiter's other reunions and general interactions. Leiter "winked at Bond behind Dexter's back" and once Dexter is gone, they "smiled at each other" (ibid., 46). Being attentive to such behaviour throughout the novels might help disprove readings like Snelling's, who argues that Bond and Leiter "are hardly more than drinking companions when not engaged in mayhem" (31). Their genuine affection for each other is built up throughout *Live and Let Die*, and culminates in Bond's distress upon finding Leiter's body after the Robber feeds him to a shark. There is an "urgency in [Bond's] voice" when he calls Tampa, he has "the movements of a sleep-walker" and he morosely reflects: he

saw again the pale straw-coloured mop that used to hang down in disarray over the right eye, grey and humorous, and below it the wry, hawk-like face of the Texan with whom he had shared so many adventures. He thought of him for a moment, as he had been. (Fleming 2012d, 185-186)

Bond clearly cares, and mourns Leiter "as he had been". This concern, and its reciprocation, is emphasised when Bond, much later, prepares his assault on Mr Big's Isle of Surprise and Strangways tells him that he has "some good news" for him: "your friend Felix Leiter's going to be all right. [...] Apparently he insisted

on getting a message to you. First thing he thought of when he could think at all. Says he's sorry not to be with you and to tell you not to get your feet wet – or at any rate, not as wet as he did” (ibid., 236). Bond's response is emotional, and shows that his job has not completely dehumanised him: “Bond's heart was full. He looked out of the window. ‘Tell him to get well quickly,’ he said abruptly. ‘Tell him I miss him’” (ibid.). While Hester is right in pointing out that Bond and Leiter meet when Bond is on a mission, these scenes illustrate that their relationship, at least emotionally, transcends the superficiality which a “work relationship” might imply.

Prior to Leiter's accident, *Live and Let Die* showcases a few suggestive exchanges, including Leiter's emergence from Bond's bedroom in the opening chapter, which demonstrate the men's closeness and comfort with each other's company. When Solitaire joins Leiter and Bond in Florida, Leiter suggests that she had “better take James's room and he can bed down with me” (ibid., 161). It is easy to read too much into Bond's agreement with the room arrangement (ibid., 174) as his attraction to Solitaire is clear: it is only Bond's injuries that prevent them from sleeping together on the Phantom (ibid., 138-142). Nevertheless, while “Bond might lust after women” he “seems happiest in the company of men. Bond's homosocial nature and his deep affection for men is most powerfully relayed in Fleming's novels in which Bond expresses the warmth he feels towards his male allies” (Funnell and Dodds, 30). Benson likewise argues, in a discussion of Bond and Leiter, that “Bond seems to depend on this alliance with a male friend – it means more to him, sometimes, than his relationship with any woman in the novels” (n.p.). The novels indeed seem to invite such readings: “Bond treasured his men friends and Felix Leiter was a great slice of his past” (Fleming 2012e, 203).

One way to think through the relationship between Bond and his “men friends”, is to, like Funnell and Dodds do, employ the concept of (male) homosociality. Literary critic and queer theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick explains that the term homosocial most basically “describes social bonds between persons of the same sex” (2016, 1). By connecting homosociality with (erotic) desire, Sedgwick argues that this allows for a conceptualisation of “a continuum between homosocial and homosexual” (ibid., 1-2). Writing in 1985, Sedgwick points out that, in this respect, there is a difference between male and female homosociality: “‘women loving women’ and ‘women promoting the interests of women’” is easily understood as a continuum, but this is not the case for men (ibid., 3). Brian

Baker, in *Masculinity in Fiction and Film*, works with Sedgwick's definition of homosociality and suggests that the very idea of a continuum

is what provokes such anxiety in postwar America: that the rigorously repressed element of desire in male homosocial relationships may have manifested itself in wartime. This fear was exacerbated by the publication of the first volume of the Kinsey Report in 1948 (on men) [...] [which] suggested that homosexual acts were much more widespread than anyone had believed. (2006, 4)

In this social climate, men “retreat[] from relations with women but [are] unable to embrace homosexuality either: a double bind. The American male protagonist then has recourse to a sublimated homosexual feeling with other like men, what Sedgwick calls ‘homosociality’” (ibid., 15). While Baker writes about the American context here, he later discusses Bond and the British context. Bond has to reject homosexuality, because homosexuality and villainy became closely associated in 1950s Britain due to the defection of the British diplomat Guy Burgess. Baker explains that “Burgess’s homosexuality was identified with his status as a ‘traitor’: non-normativeness with regard to sexual orientation was clearly mapped onto non-normativeness of political orientation: Burgess was doubly ‘queer’” (ibid., 37). Jeremy Black, whom Baker points at here, further indicates that “the repeatedly affirmed heterosexuality of Bond is a rejection of the ambiguity that Fleming saw in homosexuality, an ambiguity that was political as much as sexual. The homosexual traitor Guy Burgess was thus the antithesis of Bond” (105-106).

The concurrence of villainy and homosexuality, like villainy and physical non-normativity, is well established throughout the novels.⁹ In *Diamonds Are Forever*, Leiter discusses Wint’s notable thumb wart in the same paragraph in which he speculates that Kidd “[p]robably shacks up with Wint. Some of these homos make the worst killers” (Fleming 2012b, 157). *The Man with the Golden Gun* describes Bond’s opponent Francisco Scaramanga not only as having a third nipple, but also as “sexually abnormal” and as “a sexual fetishist with possible homosexual tendencies” (Fleming 2012e, 39). In that same novel, Bond attempts

9 Matthew Bellamy suggests that Bond provided an escapist fantasy for an audience worrying about the fallout of Burgess and Maclean’s defections, a fantasy that “derives much of its cultural resonance and import from the continued villainizing of homosexuals, especially those in state service” (2018, 136-137). Bellamy further suggests that Bond replaces the homosocial gentleman spy of the past (137), but perhaps there is a spectrum here, and a fluidity across that spectrum.

(and fails) to assassinate M as Bond has been brainwashed by the KGB in the preceding novel. M partly excuses him for his actions, noting that that “007 was a sick man” (ibid., 13). He asks Bond “if you found these people so reasonable and charming, why didn’t you stay there [with the KGB]? Others have. Burgess is dead, but you could have chummed up with Maclean” (ibid., 20). By lumping in Bond with Burgess and Maclean, and calling the brainwashed Bond a sick man, M reinforces the threefold relationship between being a double agent, being homosexual, and being “sick”.

Were Bond to feel homosexual desire in such a work (and social) environment, he would have to repress it. Nevertheless, Bond himself seems a bit more progressive in his views than M is, showing how the novels subtly engage with the homosocial/homosexual continuum. Bond remarks, to Tiffany Case, that he is “almost married already. To a man. Name begins with M” (Fleming 2012b, 262). *Diamonds Are Forever* was published a decade before the 1967 Sexual Offences Act, which partly decriminalised certain homosexual acts in the UK, and Bond’s quip shows that he is able to – however jokingly – conceive of a marriage between men. M, however, might not appreciate the quip as his views of homosexuality become clear in *The Man with the Golden Gun*. This novel has another scene that suggests Bond’s comparatively progressive views. Bond has infiltrated Scaramanga’s operations as his bodyguard-*cum*-security-officer, but is identified as James Bond by Scaramanga’s hotel manager. However, after the manager is revealed to be a CIA operative, “Bond looked at the man with the recognition that exists between crooks, between homosexuals, between secret agents. It is the look common to men bound by secrecy – by common trouble” (Fleming 2012e, 108). Bond thinking these kinds of men have something in “common” suggests some sense of kinship, and putting in concomitance homosexuality and government service reads much more positively here than the earlier link to Burgess. This kinship can be related to Leiter in another reading, although it is a bit of a stretch. The word “crook”, other than referring to villains occasionally, is used between Bond and Leiter. Just after the quote above, the CIA operative leads Bond to Leiter, whom he calls a “goddamned lousy crook” after his disbelief and joy at seeing Leiter – the next chapter opens with Bond being, after this meeting, “almost lightheaded with pleasure” (ibid., 110). In *Diamonds Are Forever*, Bond calls Leiter a “crooked spy” and Leiter calls Bond “you crook!” (Fleming 2012b, 84, 166). This is clearly affectionate, jocular usage, and allows for a reading of the quote above as suggesting it is, perhaps, not so bad to be bound by secrecy with

other men – whether they be crooks, homosexuals, secret agents, or some combination of those things.

The novels further illustrate that, although much about him might resist a homosexual if not a homosocial reading, masculine qualities are attractive to Bond. In *Thunderball*, what draws Bond's attention to Domino – after a paragraph reflecting on the dangers of women drivers – is that “this girl drove like a man. [...] And, equally rare in a woman, she took a man's pleasure in the feel of her machine” (Fleming 1963, 110). This is high praise from a man whose “car was his only personal hobby. [...] Bond drove it hard and well and with an almost sensual pleasure” (Fleming 2012a, 38). In *Live and Let Die*, during the aforementioned train ride from New York to Florida, Bond and Solitaire kiss: “she brought his lips against hers again and kissed him long and lasciviously, as if she was the man and he the woman” (Fleming 2012d, 138). This gender role reversal shows Bond carefully exploring what constitutes masculinity and femininity, and this is a positive experience for him: Bond tells Solitaire that “[y]ou kiss more wonderfully than any girl I have ever known” (ibid., 139). Her masculine way of kissing appeals to him just like Domino's masculine way of driving does. Christine Bold refers to related examples as “textual slippage,” with “homoerotic pleasure surfacing in physical descriptions of women” (2009, 212). Reading Bond's relationship with some women foregrounds that these “masculine” qualities, that are implicitly present in his men friends, are attractive to Bond. The narrative might not reflect on this explicitly because Bond understands those (attractive) qualities to be present in men inherently.

Bond and Leiter also explore masculine/feminine boundaries in their relationship, which can be read as a homosocial relationship that they navigate with the heterosexual vocabulary available to them. Baker explains that the 1957 Wolfendon Report led to “the codification of the sexual category of ‘homosexual’ within the law (and therefore stricter regulation of homosexuality in public and private)” (33). Despite Bond's joke about being married to M, marriage was then a heterosexual institution. Likewise, Bond might not have a bi- or homosexual (or homosocial) vocabulary readily available through which to negotiate his relationship with Leiter, and therefore they engage with a heterosexual vocabulary and assign male and female roles to themselves. In *Live and Let Die*, Leiter sets himself up submissively by “arranging the flowers” by Bond's bedside, and Bond continues this ploy when he calls M and they discuss Bond's mission in code, over the phone. Bond explains he's “off right away with Felicia,” which puzzles M (Fleming 2012d, 109). Bond spells it out for him: F-E-L-I (from the) C-I-A. In other words, Felix from the CIA, Bond's “new secretary from Washington” (ibid.).

Here Bond assigns “Felicia” Leiter a female secretarial role. The opposite happens in *Thunderball*. Leiter calls Bond at his hotel, waking Bond from a nightmare: “Bond reached out a drugged hand for the receiver. It was Leiter. [...] What the hell was Bond doing? Did he want someone to help with the zip?” (Fleming 1963, 140). This implies Bond struggling with a dress, needing someone to zip it up. Later, when the *Manta* submarine docks and they are about to board, Leiter says, “[w]ell, here we go. And to one hell of a bad start. Not a hat between us to salute the quarter deck with. You curtsy, I’ll bow” (ibid., 194). In playing around with assigning these gender roles, even in fun, the strict binary division between these categories fades. Their interactions also evince very little of the general anxiety about what masculinity might constitute in “debates over homosexuality in the 1950s” (Baker, 33). The novels explicitly engage with the relationship between (homo)sexuality and villainy at a time of anxiety about the definition of these categories, and in showing a measure of flexibility with them the novels seem to subtly subvert contemporary rigid social expectations. Edward Biddulph makes a similar argument about a scene in *Diamonds Are Forever* in which Leiter orders Bond’s food for him, and Bond’s response to this may “suggest[] a familiarity” like that “between close friends or even a couple in a domestic relationship” (2019, 181). However, as Biddulph points out, such a reading does not adequately frame this scene within its sociocultural 1950’s context, in which such behaviour as the host of a meal was not unexpected. Nevertheless, “it remains reasonable to suggest that contemporaneous social convention with regard to hospitality, which is reflected in the dining descriptions, permitted such a relationship to develop by providing opportunities for gender conventions to be subtly subverted” (ibid., 182).

Leiter is thus an important character to appreciate Bond’s (as well as Leiter’s) understanding of his masculinity and sexuality, as their relationship is an important locus in which the boundaries of these categories are navigated. Whether the evidence presented suggests that they are navigating (erotic) desire in their homosocial relationship or not, they are certainly good friends. This viewpoint is neglected too often in discussions of the geopolitical dimensions of the novels.

ORGANISATIONS AND ALLIANCES

Having shown that Leiter can be read as a dynamic character in his own right, and having examined Bond and Leiter’s relationship as a friendship, this article will now turn to the role politics play between Bond and Leiter. The political fa-

cet of their relationship is one that is supported by friendship, rather than the antagonism which the historical situation might have suggested (cf. Black, 61; Lindner 2009, 85-86). Their political relationship is, of course, relevant and articulated in *Casino Royale* when Leiter provides Bond with the funds he needs to continue gambling with Le Chiffre. Leiter's money is accompanied by a note: "Marshall Aid. Thirty-two million francs. With the compliments of the USA" (Fleming 2012a, 100).¹⁰ Christopher Moran points out that early CIA presence in Europe, among which we might count Leiter's job in Royale-les-Eaux, was "closely tied to the objectives of the Marshall Plan, including covert support for European unity" (2013, 131). Receiving this aid might, or perhaps should have, offended Bond's national pride. Nevertheless, there are no hard feelings between Bond and Leiter. After giving him the money, Leiter simply "grinned slightly and Bond smiled back" (Fleming 2012a, 100); so, rather than reading this interaction (solely) as a power play between the US and the UK, it can be read as a favour between two men on their way to becoming fast friends. This reading is supported by Bond's later response to the money: "That envelope was the most wonderful thing that ever happened to me. I thought I was really finished. It wasn't at all a pleasant feeling. Talk about a friend in need. One day I'll try and return the compliment" (ibid., 114-115). Naturally, all of this can be read as a veiled metaphor which reduces these characters to representatives of their respective national interests. However, such a simplistic reading would not do justice to the social dimensions of the relationship between these characters, and likewise does not explain the issue that Black raises: that the novels suggest "a far smoother working of the Anglo-American alliance than was in fact the case" (7). Chapman similarly notes that Bond and Leiter's "professional and personal friendship" is representative of the Special Relationship, but that the novels show "a quaint reversal of the real balance of power" between the US and the UK (1999, 59). Reading Bond and Leiter's relationship as personal first, and political second, provides a solution to this conundrum.

Some of Fleming's own friendships, and his connection to the CIA, might help shed light on the novels' positive portrayal of the collaboration between the transatlantic secret services. Among Fleming's friends were John Felix Charles "Ivar" Bryce, and Thomas and Marion Leiter, whose names provided inspiration for Felix Leiter's. Felix Leiter's friendship with Bond may have been modelled on Fleming's own friendships with Ivar Bryce and Ernest Cuneo, and Fleming's

10 The Marshall Plan was the American "post-Second World War reconstruction plan for Europe" (Pisani 1991, 25) which involved economic aid to western European countries damaged in WWII.

American travels with them informed parts of his novels set in the US (Cull 2019, x).¹¹ Cuneo was an American, to whom Fleming was introduced during the war. He was American Colonel William “Wild Bill” Donovan’s “personal liaison between British intelligence, the White House, and the FBI”, and Fleming “engaged Cuneo in a typical Anglo-American exchange” in the spirit of friendship (Conant 2008, 97-98). Cuneo’s job might have inspired Leiter becoming “liaison” between the FBI and CIA in *Live and Let Die*. Fleming seemingly wanted to avoid having an issue of conflicting loyalties arise in his friendship with Cuneo by writing to him in 1957 that “[m]y friendship with you is far more important to me than my status with NANA [North American Newspaper Alliance] and now with the syndicates” (qtd. in Fleming 2015, 88). Fleming was European vice-president of NANA (then owned by Cuneo) until mid-1957 (Buckton 2021, 283-284), but interpersonal friendship here supersedes allegiance to the organisation. Perhaps Fleming’s conduct was likewise inspired by the behaviour of his characters; in *Diamonds Are Forever* (1956), Bond and Leiter also navigate the tension between loyalty to each other and to their respective organisations (see below).

Fleming was also involved in establishing the CIA. During Fleming’s own WWII intelligence work, he became John Godfrey’s personal assistant. Godfrey was then Director of Naval Intelligence, and he met with US President Roosevelt to “make the British case for an American centralized intelligence service” (Willman 2005, 183). Godfrey left Fleming in the US to work on establishing this service together with Colonel Donovan, who would head the Office of Coordinator of Information, the COI: the predecessor of the CIA (ibid.). Fleming would later boast about his role in setting up what, in 1947, became the CIA (ibid., 183-184). Fleming might have been fond of the organisation, and this affection may have influenced his portrayal of the CIA in the Bond novels. This is impossible to prove, though, and what we are left with are the (persistently popular) novels as they are, and how these literary texts portray the Special Relationship. Moran argues that there are, broadly speaking, three ways of understanding Anglo-American relations: the evangelical, the functional, and the terminal. The terminal is characterised by the relationship being “a linguistic construct [...] that has prevented Britain from coming to terms with its diminished status on the international stage” (124). The functional hinges on an understanding between the countries’ same or similar objectives, justifying collaborations (ibid.). The evangelical

11 Fleming often used names of people he knew in his novels: Bryce is also used as an alias for Bond and Solitaire (Mr and Mrs Bryce) on the Silver Phantom in *Live and Let Die*, and Cuneo becomes *Diamonds Are Forever*’s Ernie Cuneo, the friendly cab-driver who helps out Bond after Leiter introduces them to each other.

“posits that an indefinable bond of trust and cooperation connects the two countries” (ibid.). Moran argues that Fleming portrays the Anglo-American relationship as an evangelical one, but points out that “[i]n real life, the relationship was often mired in distrust and suspicion” (ibid.).

This Anglo-American distrust does not become apparent in the Bond novels. While Leiter may play second fiddle on some of his missions with Bond, the CIA as organisation seems to suffer less. Given Fleming’s own fondness for the CIA, it is odd that Leiter is relegated to the Pinkerton’s detective agency in *Diamonds Are Forever*. Leiter indicates that Pinkerton’s made him a “good offer”, but perhaps the CIA’s offer of a desk job after Leiter becomes disabled would not be difficult to beat (Fleming 2012b, 86). Leiter’s employment with Pinkerton’s is something that remains unexplored in many key publications. Leiter is employed by the CIA only in Fleming’s first two novels, and even then not very straightforwardly. In *Live and Let Die* he is “sort of a liaison between the Central Intelligence Agency and our friends of the FBI” (Fleming 2012d, 10). This work-around might simply be a plot necessity to allow Leiter to work on American territory (with Bond), which the CIA is not allowed to do. In *Thunderball*, Leiter tells Bond he has been temporarily drafted by the CIA for Operation Thunderball and specifically to “team up with [Bond] down here” (Fleming 1963, 121). In *Goldfinger*, Bond addresses his secret message to “FELIX LEITER CARE PINKERTON’S DETECTIVE AGENCY” (Fleming 2012c, 314). After receiving that message, “Leiter had really got cracking – to his chief, then to the FBI and the Pentagon. The FBI’s knowledge of Bond’s record, plus contact with M through the Central Intelligence Agency, had been enough to get the whole case up to the President within an hour” (ibid., 347). Leiter goes to the FBI – perhaps because the attack on Fort Knox is a domestic matter – meaning that the CIA does not feature much in *Goldfinger*. Lastly, in *The Man with the Golden Gun*, Leiter “was still working for Pinkerton’s, but was also on the reserve of the CIA, who had drafted him for this particular assignment because of his knowledge, gained in the past mostly with James Bond, of Jamaica” (Fleming 2012e, 115).

So while Leiter has a connection to the CIA in most of the novels, his relationship with the CIA is not straightforward and at times tenuous. His change of employment might be a response to the difficulty his domestic work as CIA operative might have posed in *Live and Let Die*; having Leiter with the Pinkerton’s allows him and Bond to work together on US domestic matters, as in *Diamonds Are Forever*. In that novel, he asks Bond if he wants to work together on the Spang case: “maybe we can help each other. Without involving our outfits, of course. Okay?” and Bond replies “[y]ou know I’d like to work with you, Felix, [...] [b]ut

I'm still working for the Government while you're probably in competition with yours. But if it turns out our target's the same, there's no sense in getting wires crossed. If we're chasing the same hare, I'll be happy to run with you" (Fleming 2012b, 87). This illustrates that Bond likes working together with Leiter, and that this does not necessarily have to happen through official channels. The transatlantic collaboration is performed on an interpersonal rather than an organisational level, which further emphasises the importance of reading Bond and Leiter's political relationship through the lens of their friendship. Leiter is on reserve to the CIA in *Thunderball* and *The Man with the Golden Gun* specifically because he works well together with Bond. In the latter novel, when Bond first sees Leiter, he "stopped in his tracks. His face split into a smile broader than he had smiled for what? Was it three years or four?" (Fleming 2012e, 108). Bond's joy at working with Leiter becomes evident, and appears to be an important source of happiness in Bond's life. Attention to this relationship thus also further helps in understanding how Bond is humanised – he is more than simply a representation of British fortitude.

CONCLUSION: HAPPY TO RUN WITH YOU

At the time Fleming wrote his Bond stories, the relationship between US and UK intelligence services was fraught. The US was concerned "about Britain as a security risk, a comment on the impact of Burgess, Maclean, Blake and Philby. [...] The CIA's counterintelligence staff understandably had little confidence in British intelligence" (Black, 61). Moreover, after the defections, the Suez Canal crisis in 1956 "publicly signalled the end of Britain's international clout" and showed that, in the post-war "geopolitical reshuffle [...] Britain lost out to its more influential wartime ally, the US" (Lindner, 85-86). In the light of recent blemishes on British intelligence, Fleming might have wanted to show that MI6 had plenty to offer, still. While Bond therefore sees most of the action in the novels, Leiter's presence must be understood as being multi-faceted: he is more than simply an American intelligence operative over whom Bond triumphs.

The novels portray the relationship between UK and US intelligence positively – and perhaps idealistically so. Nevertheless, understanding Leiter's role in the novels as predominantly Bond's friend, and secondarily as representative of American political interests, helps answer the question why this may be so. The novels in which Leiter features illustrate a transatlantic intelligence atmosphere of trust, rather than suspicion. It shows two allied intelligence services working together in a geopolitical, Cold War environment in which trust was a scarce

commodity, united against common enemies: first SMERSH, then SPECTRE. This approach to the novels does not ignore the charged political atmosphere, but rather reads in them the desire to improve relations: whenever friends work together, evil is defeated.

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