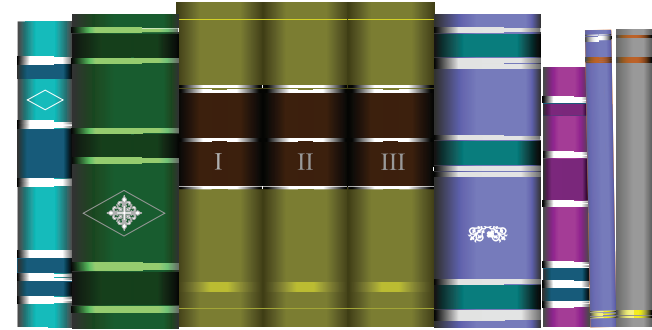


# BOOKS

## WHAT ARE THEY READING?



## License to read: Did 007 have a hidden agenda?

James Bond novels work to keep the 'great' in Britain

By **PATRICK WEBB**  
For *The Daily Astorian*

I was a lone child. Don't misunderstand: I am never lonely, but my only brother was four years older, a gap which widened as the 1960s blurred and the 1970s dawned.

So I grew up in a solo fantasy world inside my head, in Surrey, a rural county south of England's capital.

I was either at the library or in the bookstore.

Yes, I paid attention throughout all seven grades of high school, just as, years later, I jumped through the hoops needed to earn my two degrees. But most of my true education has been my own. Books. More books. And more books.

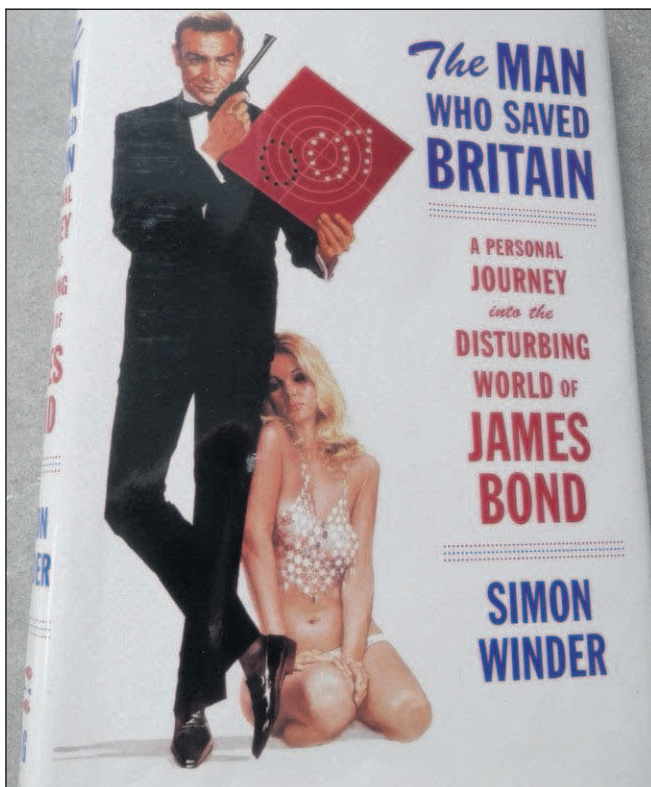
Every school day I had 38 minutes to wait in the market town of Leatherhead between the two-station train journey and the Route 462 bus ride to my village. Time enough to wander into those beloved brick cathedrals of knowledge, where I found myself by losing myself in dusty pages of adventurous prose.

### A bond with Bond

At the Bookworm in North Street, just yards from the bus stop, I spent my allowance collecting all 14 of the James Bond books. At the time, it seemed I read them as fast as Ian Fleming could churn them out. Checking the dates, I discovered the author actually died when I was seven, entering second grade. Like many childhood memories, it's skewed. But "The Man with the Golden Gun" and "Octopussy" (including "The Living Daylights"), were published posthumously during my later school years.

I remember starting to read each one, squatting in the dusty corner to the right of the entrance, one eye on the window for the big green bus. The Bond shelf was chest height for me, knee for others. A sickly child, that dust never made me sneeze.

The store was rich in hardbacks, with shiny leather-like covers in muted green, blue



Patrick Webb/For The Daily Astorian

**"The Man Who Saved Britain: A Personal Journey into the Disturbing World of James Bond,"** by Simon Winder, examines the history of Ian Fleming's novels and their correlation with the era in which they appeared.

and brown hues. Classics about Admiral Nelson or by the Brontës. The paperback covers I sought showed a fearless Sean Connery shouldering his pistol with barely-clad females draped around his leg, in the shadow of a villain or with a shark swimming off the page.

"Good living, sex and violent action ..." was a tagline that the London Times Literary Supplement gave "Thunderball." That triumvirate provided a feast of spycraft, glamour, danger. Card games, pistols, food, drink. Bond taught me baccarat, canasta and, in "Moonraker," even bridge. Bond taught me about Moët champagne and pâté de foie gras. A little about Walther PPKs and Beretta 418s. And, there was the sex. It certainly sounded enjoyable, though it didn't seem to treat ladies entirely nicely.

### Personified evil

Fleming's villains personified evil, Ernst Stavro Blofeld, Oddjob, Rosa Klebb — no author drew them better. "Live and Let Die," which spawned my brief fascination with voodoo, has the best chapter heading ever written ("He disagreed with something that ate him"). Even "The Spy Who Loved Me," Fleming's lone venture into first-person female narrative, offered

dubious attractions for a boy who had no sisters to answer those kind of questions.

For birthday presents, I favored experience over gifts, so my parents obliged me with London trips to see the Harlem Globetrotters or James Stewart onstage in "Harvey." One blissful year, the Odeon cinema at nearby Epsom offered a double bill of "Goldfinger" and "Thunderball." Four hours and 2 minutes of Bond!

Years later, I learn that Cmdr. J.H. Bond, R.N. (ret.), was not merely a fictional hero saving the world from the Russian atomic nightmare. There was another agenda: salvaging Britain's tarnished reputation as the nation of my birth faded from the world stage.

### Perpetuating an invincible image

This theme is highlighted in "The Man Who Saved Britain: A Personal Journey into the Disturbing World of James Bond," by Simon Winder.

Winder is a Briton a couple of years my junior who shared my experience growing up fascinated, nay obsessed, with Bond. He writes how Fleming's best, "From Russia With Love," "Dr. No" and "Goldfinger," set the standard for every spy novel that followed. But the former wartime in-



Photo courtesy Paul Messerschmidt

The Bookworm bookstore in Leatherhead, Surrey, south of London, is long gone, replaced by a bed store (see red storefront facade at right of photo). Schoolboy Patrick Webb spent his allowance in the bookstore, mostly on James Bond novels, while waiting for his bus home from the train station.

### BOOK REVIEW

"The Man Who Saved Britain: A Personal Journey into the Disturbing World of James Bond," by Simon Winder  
Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 312 pages, 2006.

telligence officer had another agenda, too: perpetuating Britain's invincible image.

Despite postwar bloodshed as India and Pakistan achieved independence, Great Britain's stand against the Nazis in World War II gave it a strong position for about 10 years as the devastated world rebuilt. Although food rationing continued well beyond the war, the era saw the creation of the National Health Service, guaranteeing free care for all, and the splendor of Queen Elizabeth's coronation; increases in car and television ownership signaled regained prosperity.

### The sun sets on an Empire

But everything changed mid-decade. Winder reminds readers of the extraordinary convulsions throughout Britain after a 1956 crisis. When Egypt's leader nationalized the Suez Canal, British, French and Israeli troops parachuted in with rifles blazing. The invasion — condemned by U.S. President Dwight Eisenhower — was a fiasco. The prime minister resigned in disgrace. Britain's clout in world affairs has never again been so high.

"Here was a country whose ideology had been based around telling much of the world what to do, whose

raison d'être had been to flick through newspapers seeing who this week had been invaded and incorporated into the Empire, who now found itself after enduring a decade of steady humiliation being howled down by virtually every country, ally or enemy," Winder writes.

"It was the end of Britain as an independent actor. Most of the world breathed a sigh of relief, but for a traditional patriot it was not an appealing time to be alive."

Winder says Fleming's literary talents don't match contemporaries like William Golding and Kingsley Amis (who would write the first Bond sequel, "Colonel Sun," after Fleming's death). But he praises the author, an uppercrust friend of the disgraced political leaders, for capturing the essence of his nation.

"I can think of no writer — and it doesn't matter if it is accidentally or deliberately that Fleming does this — who comes close to bringing to life the neuroses, panics, highs, dreams and disappointments of a Britain that has now vanished and whose death throes he romanced."

### Salvaged as props

Times continue to change. Leatherhead Public Library remains open, a shell of its

old self. The desktop computers that fill its busiest room had not been invented when I lurked there. Across town, Hamsey's Bed Centre fills the Bookworm's old storefront plus two adjacent shops. The Bookworm's first owner, old Mr. Starr, was such a nice bloke. But he and his trendy grandson, Rowland, died; sadly, their heirs committed the sacrilege of closing it.

On return visits to my hometown, I wondered where all those books went. I learned the answer sitting — alone — at London's Apollo Theatre. Something seemed strangely recognizable to my subconscious as I watched Peter Bowles (an English actor you would recognize if you saw his photo) starring in a revival of Terrence Rattigan's "After Lydia," a play about Rex Harrison's actress wife, Kay Kendall, dying of leukemia.

The acting was fine, but the set gave me chills. Mocked-up living-room shelves were rich in books, polished, yet worn. Blues and browns, mostly. Some subdued greens.

I checked the program at intermission: "Books courtesy The Bookworm, Leatherhead."

I was shaken and stirred.  
*North Coast writer Patrick Webb is a former managing editor of The Daily Astorian.*

## Mystery of missing men in Hong Kong takes a twist

Activists worry about crackdowns on free expression

By **KELVIN CHAN**  
*Associated Press*

HONG KONG — Five men associated with a Hong Kong publisher known for books critical of China's leaders have vanished one by one in the last three months, alarming activists and deepening suspicions that main-

land authorities are squeezing free expression in the enclave.

The mystery took another turn Tuesday when the wife of the latest man to disappear said she now believes he went to China voluntarily and has canceled a missing person's report for him.

Lee Bo, a British citizen who vanished Dec. 30, purportedly wrote to say he went to mainland China to help with an investigation. His case has sparked fears that he was seized in Hong Kong by security agents from the mainland and taken there in violation of an agreement

giving Hong Kong a high degree of control over its own affairs.

Lee's wife said she believed the letter showed he wasn't acting under pressure.

"I believe that it was voluntarily written, so that's why I retracted the case," Choi Ka-ping told reporters in brief comments.

### A Mighty Current

Lee and the other four missing men are associated with the publisher Mighty Current, which specializes in gossipy books on political scandals involving China's

Communist leaders and other sensitive topics that are banned in the mainland.

The disappearance of the five all since October has raised concerns Beijing is eroding the "one country, two systems" principle that's been in place since Britain ceded control of Hong Kong to China in 1997. The principle maintains civil liberties in Hong Kong that are nonexistent on the mainland, including freedom of the press.

British Foreign Secretary Philip Hammond, on a visit to Beijing, said he pressed officials for information on Lee.

"We have urgently enquired, both of the Hong Kong authorities and of the mainland Chinese authorities, what if anything they know of his whereabouts," Hammond said. He added that if Lee is involved in any investigation, it should be settled by the Hong Kong judicial system.

### Warnings against 'assumptions'

Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi, speaking at the same press briefing, warned against making "assumptions or meaningless spec-

ulations" about Lee, saying that "above all, he is a Chinese citizen."

When Lee vanished, he reportedly did not have a travel permit for mainland China with him, an indication he didn't plan to go there that triggered speculation about Chinese security agents abducting him. The four others were last seen either in mainland China or Thailand.

An image of Lee's handwritten letter was published by Taiwan's government-affiliated Central News Agency late Monday and subsequently by Hong Kong media.

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