

## “Everybody’s Fantasy”: James Bond Films From Connery to Craig By James L. Neibaur and Gary Schneeberger

The James Bond film series that started with Sean Connery as 007 in 1962’s *Dr. No* arguably ended with Daniel Craig holstering the Walther PPK in *No Time to Die* in 2021 – with four other actors portraying the increasingly iconic leading role in between. Given the success of the 25 films that comprise the official canon – more than \$5.8 billion in U.S. box-office receipts adjusted for inflation – it is certain that the big-screen adventures of 007 will continue in some form in the years to come. But all signs point to a hard reboot that will reset the sometimes slight but ever-present continuity that connected the series with a narrative and familiar-face throughline. Connective tissue exists between each movie in EON’s cinematic universe as it now exists; it seems certain that the next movie will launch a new universe.

Whatever that next incarnation of Bond looks like, the legacy of the first one will endure, occupying an enviable place in pop culture and the hearts of its legions of fans. Each of the six men who have played Bond imbued the role with a unique perspective in the context of the overarching themes translated from creator Ian Fleming’s novels onto the screen. Just as important, the cinematic James Bond both reflected and helped shape culture: He was not just played by different leading men, he was set into and against a society that experienced, during his run, the height of the Cold War, the Civil Rights movement, man’s race to the moon, the sexual revolution, women’s liberation, Wall Street unease and abuse, the fall of Communism (at least in the Soviet Union), a growing political and ideological divide in the U.S., increasing globalization and breakthroughs in technology that were unimaginable when Fleming and the filmmakers who brought his creation to theaters were trying to imagine them. And 007 remained relevant through all of it.

How? Consider this appreciation from Maud Adams, a two-time “Bond girl” (as they

came to be known in the '60s when it was OK to describe the series' femme fatales and/or love interests for 007 in such terms). Adams starred opposite Roger Moore, the third and longest-tenured actor to play secret agent, in *The Man with the Golden Gun* (1974) and *Octopussy* (1983).

It's a classical story. It's about the hero and the antihero. And good always wins in the end, which is wonderful. It has some nice romantic stories in it also. It's a classic fairy tale. Bond is also a fantasy figure for women. My goodness, he is the person you'd love to have an affair with – maybe not marry – but he is this very complicated, this very virile and very strong man. He's a sex object, my God."<sup>1</sup>

Barbara Carrera, who starred as the unstably evil Fatima Blush opposite original Bond Sean Connery in the unofficial (i.e., non-EON Productions produced) 1983 outing *Never Say Never Again* – which marked his return to the role after 12 years away – offers this assessment of the films' hold on their audience and the world in which that audience lives.

Every man wants to be James Bond. And every woman wants to be seduced by James Bond. So, everybody is interested in this character. Plus, for entertainment purposes alone, it is full of incredible action, the people are all very beautiful, they do extraordinary things. And you know it's not possible in real life, but it's so compelling and engrossing you accept it. Everybody has something that they can relate to. Different generations, they relate to the Bond they grew up with. But it's always the same fascination. They're all fascinated by this person that can ... a woman loves the Bond character because she feels he can protect her. And every man wants to be like Bond so all women can fall over them, and they can be lethal and can do anything in this world and can kill somebody because they have a license to do it. The format has remained the

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<sup>1</sup> Interview with the authors, 2021.

same. Same formula with different settings. It changes with the times. It's always beautiful girls, handsome men, exotic locations. Everything is beautiful to look at. It's a fantasy. It's a great fantasy. That's what a Bond film is: everybody's fantasy."<sup>2</sup>

It's a fantasy that backfilled itself with reliable tropes through its run: the breathtaking cold-open action set piece, often but not always unrelated to the greater plot; it is followed by Bond using his license to kill through the tight-shot vantage point of a gun barrel, dropping a few notes of the "James Bond Theme" by Monty Norman, then giving way to a big theme song playing over dreamily artistic and alternately violent and sexy animation. That theme music, always an original song, has been performed by the biggest recording stars at the time of a film's release: Tom Jones' *Thunderball* (1965), Paul McCartney and Wings' *Live and Let Die* (1973), Duran Duran's *A View to a Kill* (1985), Sheryl Crow's *Tomorrow Never Dies* (1997), Jack White's and Alicia Keyes' "Another Way to Die" (from *Quantum of Solace*, 2008). Adele's *Skyfall* (2012) and Billie Eilish's *No Time to Die* (2021). Don't forget the cars, bookended by the Aston Martin DB5 that debuted in *Goldfinger* (1964) and bowed out in *No Time to Die* (with six more appearances in between) – but also including memorable street machines like the Lotus Esprit that transforms into a submarine (*The Spy Who Loved Me*, 1977), the Rolls Royce Silver Cloud II (*A View to a Kill*, 1985), and the BMW Z8 (*The World Is Not Enough*, 1999). And while there are typically several glamorous automobiles, there is usually one primary villain, whose nationality and conquest goals vary by the cultural realities of the era. Regardless of exactly what he or she is after, though, megalomania is at work – in a very real sense, every Bond nemesis is Hitler. From Dr. No to Blofeld, from Goldfinger to Hugo Drax, there's dangerous crazy on display, sometimes over-the-top, sometimes understated, almost always begrudgingly respectful of Bond's mettle.

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<sup>2</sup> Interview with the authors, 2021.

It is on James Bond's mettle that the films we examine in this book ultimately rise or fall. It is impossible to have a laudable, let alone a classic, James Bond movie without the character's signature panache occupying the airspace. A rousing, even good *movie*? Yes. But to be a truly rousing or good *James Bond movie* requires some mixture of the cold-bloodedness, charm, guts, determination, wit, confidence, intelligence, strength, smarts and sexual appetite that Fleming wrote into his DNA. Each man who carried that license to kill pushes and pulls on different levers of the character. In broad brush strokes, we have defined each Bond actor's gravitas in the role in the following terms:

Sean Connery: Above it all

George Lazenby: Equipped for it all

Roger Moore: Bemused by it all

Timothy Dalton: Resigned to it all

Pierce Brosnan: Seen it all

Daniel Craig: Causes it all

Actor Robert Davi, the villain in *Licence to Kill*, makes a similar point in shorthand when asked to spotlight who played the role best.

"That's the wrong way to look at it – who's best," Davi said. "They all add something to Fleming's vision for the character. It's like, "Whose Hamlet is best?" They all bring something to Hamlet that maybe you hadn't seen before. So sit back and enjoy the show."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Interview with the authors, 2021.