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The James Bond Phenomenon: A Critical Reader (review)

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trated—owned by libraries, institutions, private collectors, devotees, and simple enthusiasts—to compile an impressive twelve-part appendix that summarizes all 169 titles plus the many offshoots. Writers, artists, illustrators, designers, and painters, and, of course, the founder, Albert Kanter, are detailed and each person's contribution lauded. As Mr. Jones explains, what started as a 1941 shoestring operation eventually turned into an international publishing phenomenon. Why wouldn't it? As the noted journalist Pete Hamill remarked, these comic books provided a road map for real books.

Since all children, Mr. Jones asserts, create their own mythology as they reinvent the world, there are always tangible elements at work shaping these ideas. During this thirty-year period, thousands of youngsters fell under the spell of *Classic Comics*. Here, many American teenagers fantasized about *War of the Worlds*, *Ivanhoe*, or *Toilers of the Sea* as they evolved into adults. These narratives, of course, remained with them.

As an academic study, *Classics Illustrated: A Cultural History, with Illustrations* mirrors this postwar generation and the influence it yielded on every reader. With dozens of original cover photos—including a wonderful center section of color reproductions—Mr. Jones' study represents the best memory book in a long time. Anyone who remembers horse drawn milk trucks, mail deliveries twice a day, faded red enema bags, pin boys at bowling alleys, the St. Louis Browns, and the "cat's meow" will love this book. It is a work of outstanding achievement.

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Christoph Lindner, editor.
The James Bond Phenomenon:
A Critical Reader.

Manchester University Press, 2003.
268 pages, \$74.95.

Hero as Globetrotter

When Ursula Andress arose from the waves, like a discreet Venus, in *Dr. No* in 1962, she became, for all time, the quintessence of the James Bond style, so much so that Halle Berry's similar star entrance in *Die Another Day* (2002), was a sign that the old formula still intended to weave its magic in changed times. Never mind that in the intervening forty years 007 had been played by five different actors, or that the Cold War had been and gone along with Swinging London and Sean Connery's hairline. This

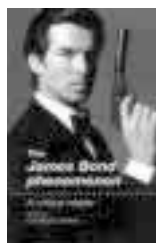
new version announced the longevity of Bond, the fact that he was a spy for all seasons.

According to *Variety*, over half the world's population has seen a Bond film, and this is not, perhaps, as surprising as it might seem. For these outrageously popular fantasy adventures tap into two general concerns that have been a worldwide constant ever since 1945. The first is an anxiety surrounding the international situation, whether it relates to potential nuclear holocaust, or to terrorism. The second rises out of the first: it is the deep, necessarily deluded need to believe that these problems are less complex than they appear, and that they can be solved by the courage and moral righteousness of an individual hero.

James Bond is that hero. This collection, written by a range of scholars from different disciplines and countries, tackles numerous issues surrounding fiction's most famous secret agent, both on screen and on the page. All the essays are, in essence, variations on the theme of the hero as globetrotter, an empire warrior sent from M's clubby office to exotic locations where he slugs it out with the Blofelds and the Largos, who, in turn, represent all the malevolent forces that whisper to us out of the headlines. A certain amount of ideological baggage goes with this idea: as many contributors point out, Bond is an imperialist, other races are not quite pukka, and the energy of conquest extends to some pretty dodgy dealings in the sex war. Yet Christoph Lindner and his team show that these issues do not remain constant. To borrow Tony Bennett's and Janet Woollacott's phrase, the character some countries call "Mister Kiss, Kiss, Bang, Bang" is "a moving signifier".

This means that the nature of Bond's heroism slips and slides according to the particular historical period, or to the writer's point of view. For example, in "Licensed to Look: James Bond and the Heroism of Consumption", Michael Denning paints the spy of the books as a response to the growing Fifties phenomenon of tourism; he sees him as a super-consumer of other cultures, who gives the banality of modern travel an added excitement: "Fleming's adventures are really tales of leisure, tales where leisure is not a packaged, commodified 'holiday'...but is an adventure, a meaningful time, a time of life and death." By contrast, Jim Leach views Pierce Brosnan's film Bond as a reconciler of current tensions surrounding the dominance of technology. The agent connects the impersonality of his gadgetry to the human cunning that can make it effective.

In the midst of these multiple views, one issue remains constant. As Judi Dench's M said, rather crisply, in Brosnan's first outing (*Goldeneye* in 1995), "you're a sexist, misogynist dinosaur." Many essays affirm this outlook in passing, but the main emphasis is on disturbing this placid assumption. In a re-reading of women in the Bond novels, Christine Bold suggests that female readers can reclaim all those breathy



Bond girls by “exploiting textual fissures and gaps that contradict the logic of masculinity or patriarchy”, while, in “James Bond’s Penis”, Toby Miller argues that the old boy, especially as represented by Sean Connery, is not just a gun-toting Lothario, but a more vulnerable prototype for the “commodified male beauty” of our own time.

It is plain, then, that all human Bondage is here, and fascinating it is, too. Unfortunately, the book as a whole is a little enslaved to fashionable theories: there is nothing biographical on Fleming the man, and how he reflected, and diverged from, his creation. This matters because this enigmatic writer shared a number of his hero’s qualities, including the fascination with fast cars, the plummy belief in Britain’s imperial mission, which had taken such a bashing after the Second World War, and the Old Etonian urge to glitter and dominate. The outlook is dandified, in fact, and some readers will miss any wider consideration of the issue, or any deeper thinking on how Bond develops the world of Richard Hannay, or even Sherlock Holmes (Moriarty versus Bond; it makes emotional sense).

These issues are touched on, admittedly, but the most thorough essay on Bond’s literary roots is, ironically, old material. As one of the opening salvos of the collection, Lindner reprints Umberto Eco’s influential “Narrative Structures in Fleming”, first published in the 1960s. Here, this seminal figure shows how Book Bond is not merely a matter of style, but of narrative structure. The original stories are modern fairy tales in which the agent is the knight, the villain the dragon, and Honeychile or Pussy Galore the reward for a job well done. As Bennett and Woollacott note in “The Moments of Bond”, the films have adapted this convention; the women, for example, have gradually taken precedence over the bad guys. Nevertheless, Eco’s analysis confirms what has always fascinated this writer, the sense that a Bond escapade is a journey through a meticulously patterned maze, with the villain, in the best films, lying at its heart, like a concealed and poisonous spider.

Lindner has compiled a good, solid book, even though it is a little repetitious in places. Because all the critics come from the political left, you end up longing for a robust conservative voice, along the lines of Kingsley Amis, to celebrate unashamedly the campy panache of 007’s allure. For the joy of swank is crucial to the series’ success; Bond beguiles us with the notion that individual style is more potent than missiles and secret hideaways. With one flick of an elegantly turned cuff, evil crumbles to dust. If only the problems of Iraq and Afghanistan were so tractable.

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Thomas Doherty. *Cold War, Cool Medium: Television, McCarthyism, and American Culture.*

Columbia University Press, 2003.

305 pages; \$27.95.

Exchange of Ideas

The premise for Thomas Doherty’s thoughtful and nuanced study, *Cold War, Cool Medium*, is that there is a simple, black and white myth about television’s role in 1950’s anti-Communism. According to legend, television facilitated Senator Joseph R. McCarthy’s rise to prominence, nourished the blacklisting of writers and actors, and contributed to the abortion of free speech. Only after the 188-hour spectacle of the Army-McCarthy hearings and the senator’s losing confrontation with army counsel, Joseph N. Welch, did TV turn against the Communist-hunter.

According to Doherty, who teaches American and Film Studies at Brandeis University and has authored several books on the visual media, the actuality of 1950s television was far more complex than the myth. He makes a convincing case. To begin with, TV was not a flattering format for McCarthy. He tended to come over as harsh and sharp, when, as Marshall McLuhan noted, television, the cool medium, favored more mellow personalities. The model politician as TV performer was Dwight D. Eisenhower, whose laid-back approach fit perfectly. Before the Nixon-Kennedy debates, Ike had a successful television style.

Further, we wrongly envisage early television programming as one-dimensional. The box allowed McCarthy and his ilk to make their points, but gave a proportionate amount of time to their opponents, who used the live talk shows characteristic of the era to hit at Red-bating excesses. Before the Army-McCarthy hearings, the senator had been weakened severely by such journalists as Edward R. Murrow, who attacked McCarthy on his show, *See It Now*. McCarthy’s filmed rejoinder was inferior to Murrow’s technically and intellectually. Television was not friendly to bullies. When Reed Harris, a state department official being badgered by McCarthy responded that he resented the senator’s attempt to publicly wring his neck, the brutal image stuck in the popular mind. More successful on television were figures whose anti-Communism took a subtler form. Thus, urbane Catholic Bishop Fulton J. Sheen, on, *Life Is Worth Living* (1952-1957), made a modulated case against Communism.

