

Creative Writing

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An example of writers writing about writing

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.....his first challenge was to find a story, especially as he “had the feeling that Fleming had pretty much exhausted the genre. The later books are pretty baroque. He seems completely fed up with the whole thing”. His solution was to seek a subject Fleming might have tackled in the Bond books, but hadn’t. “The way I attacked it was trying to think of something the villain could do that wasn’t gold, wasn’t diamonds, wasn’t bird droppings – which is what Dr No is incredibly into. And I thought, well, what about drugs? Because I’d already decided it was going to be a period piece. And I figured the last novel was set in 1965, and Bond was in a very bad way and needed time to get back on full form, so it had to be 1967.” “I thought, well, great – 1967, the summer of love. I remember it. I was 14. And what was going on? Well, drugs.

.....Scrutiny of the Bond thrillers showed they were of two kinds. There are “the crime-busting books, in which Bond is really just a superior sort of policeman, sent to break up smuggling rings and that kind of thing”. Their “very fast pace” is something Faulks admires. But they “don’t have that creepy, sinister threat of some sort of imminent nuclear holocaust or war” that crucially excites him in the other thrillers, of which he thinks Moonraker the outstanding example.

Before starting Devil May Care, did he make a check list of the regulation fittings of Bond novels – the Bentley and the Morland cigarettes, the sea-island cotton shirts, the loafers, the shoulder-holster guns, the drink, the meals, the torture, the gadgets, the girls? He put together a detailed dossier, he says, and found a “very handy” backup reference book in Henry Chancellor’s companion to the Bond novels.

Subject matter apart, I wonder how easy Fleming’s not very individualised style was to emulate. Faulks’s reply reminds you that, like Fleming, he spent years working on newspapers. “I think it’s standard journalistic: no semicolons, few adverbs, few adjectives, short sentences, a lot of verbs, a lot of concrete nouns. These are the tools, and that’s literally the style.” More distinctive, he points out, is the tone, “a sort of slight hauteur that was a little bit harder to catch – a little bit cold and a little bit superior in places”. To capture its cadences of “I’m more worldly than you”, Faulks “sometimes imagined myself sucking on my teeth, with perhaps a cigarette-holder”.

Another stimulant was a magazine piece Fleming published in 1962, How to

Write a Thriller. It's an article, I find, on reading it after the interview, in which Fleming is almost startlingly forthright about his intents as an author: "The target of my books... lay somewhere between the solar plexus and, well, the upper thigh"; "They are written for warm-blooded heterosexuals in railway trains, airplanes or beds". But it offers, Faulks stresses, a pro's invaluable advice, namely: "You've got to do it all quickly. You give yourself six weeks. You write 2,000 words a day and that will give you the required length. Don't stop. Don't agonise. Don't try to correct your prose as you go along. Don't worry too much about the details. You can always revise them later and get it checked by experts."

"I thought 2,000 words a day is probably twice as much as I would normally do," says Faulks, "but it's not unreachable." It wasn't.

A disciplined writer, he works regularly from 10am to 6pm in an office near his Holland Park home. Devil May Care propelled him there earlier than usual. "Apart from anything else, I was really enjoying it. I was very, very turned on by it." Adding to the adrenaline was a need to meet deadlines ("metaphorically tearing the paper from the typewriter") that was "fun, actually, the drive, the thrill".

Evidently exhilarated by his Bond project, Faulks talks keenly about how much internet research (into everything from Indo-Chinese torture techniques to the look and layout of Middle Eastern towns) has contributed. Some ideas originated closer to home. Inspiration for that gruesome prerequisite of the best Bond fiction, a villain's grotesque deformity, came from schoolboy memories and his father's talk of a throwback freakishness that afflicted a fellow undergraduate.