

The world has had enough

It wasn't feminism, terrorism or the end of the cold war that finally did for James Bond. It was Austin Powers

LAST week James Bond was fired. His nuclear pencil gathers dust beneath Whitehall. There is no news of 007 No 6 (Radio 4 listeners have helpfully suggested Jeremy Paxman) and the production of Bond film 21, due this November, has stalled. There is trouble at MI6, minister: our martini-quaffing sexoholic is suffering an existential crisis and it can't be cured by an intelligent Rolex or a gondola that can drive on dry land.

Eon, who produce Bond, and MGM, who finance his capers, are bickering. It is rumoured that MGM want an action-movie franchise - Spiderman in a tux - that sprouts money. As Bond said to Dr No: "World domination; same old dream; our asylums are full of men who think they are Napoleon." Eon, however, are fighting for their cold war relic, the "sexist, misogynist dinosaur" and gentleman spy who flowed from the pen of Ian Fleming.

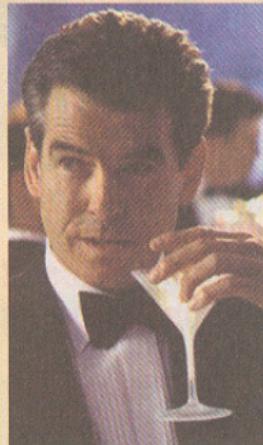
Why is Bond in crisis? He is a corpse; the hero of a dead time and a dead place called postwar Clubland. Fleming was an Eton-educated journalist who worked in British naval intelligence during the second world war, where his professional apogee was evacuating King Zog of Albania from Nazi-occupied Europe. Bond was his fantasy alter ego, a libidinous killer who thought women were "for recreation". Bond slapped bottoms and peered at his watch during sex; he killed women he had slept with and, worse, he told one dewy-eyed poppet: "I never miss."

This was acceptable in 1952, when Bond was born on the pages of Casino Royale; but feminism castrated Fleming's hero. Today, any responsible GP would refer him to Sex and Love Addicts Anonymous and any respectable woman would hit him. We know, though Fleming didn't, that Bond won't be polished off by Soviet crocodiles, but by Aids. He had a weird predilection for girls with silly names. He had an Electra, a Honey, a Christmas, a Pussy and an Octopussy. He probably had a Decapussy, or did I dream it?

Fleming created two villainous organisations to wound his baby Bond. The first was Spectre (Special Executive for Counter-Intelligence, Terrorism, Revenge and Extortion), a gaggle of freelance megalomaniacs who wanted to take over the world for fun. Today they would be politicians. Is there anyone who can't imagine Michael Howard menacingly stroking a cat, Tessa Jowell feeding the enemies of the gambling bill to sharks or Tony Blair planting a bomb under Fort Knox? Spectre grins on the news every day. You voted for it.

Fleming's other nemesis Smersh (aka Death to Spies)

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was a mutant strain of the KGB. Smersh is as frightening as eating toast. Bond always has a vodka martini and a chuckle with the Reds at the end, because, for Fleming, the cold war was just a disagreement between western gentlemen.

At the end of *The Spy Who Loved Me*, Bond escapes into a tented pod with a beautiful KGB agent. He boasts to M that he is "just keeping the British end up, sir". Recent Bonds have experimented with a psychotic heiress, a renegade British agent and a media baron who resembles Barbara Amiel. Apart from Amiel, they lacked menace. The authentic candidates for modern Bond villains are, of course, Islamist fundamentalists but it's hard to imagine even 007 peeling back a burqa or keeping the British end up with an al-Qaida operative.

Our tolerance for snobbery has withered. When we hear James musing to a baddie: "Red wine with fish; that should have told me something" and explaining that "certain things just aren't done - like drinking Dom Perignon '53 above a temperature of 38 degrees Fahrenheit" we don't fawn and sputter on to satin sheets. Bond behaves like an ancient gay dress designer, living in Surbiton and clinging to his final (crystal) marble.

Everywhere, Fleming's fastasies are dust. We've seen the faces of intelligence operatives because they flog their books at literary festivals. David Shayler is No 008; the only thing he leaves shaken but not stirred are the people he bumps into on street corners. We know from *Spycatcher* that the British secret service spend their time watching Irish grandmothers and destabilising Labour governments - and faking dossiers for Downing Street. The spying game has been demystified.

But Bond's final bullet didn't come from feminism, the government, Andrew Gilligan or the poor entertainment possibilities of modern terrorism. In the end Sean, Roger, George, Timothy and Pierce were vanquished by just one man - Austin Powers. Bond's satirical twin, who danced and shagged and bit his way through two blockbuster Bond spoofs, finally achieved what Smersh could not. Austin's silly ruffled shirts, his encounters with Dr Evil and the Fembots and, most particularly, his plaintive cry, "Do I make you horny, baby?" did for the straight man. Some things just can't withstand satire; least of all a crumbling imperialist spy who puns badly. MGM will find a new aspirational hero for us, one who won't make us hurl into our popcorn: a gay Bond, a black Bond, a paraplegic Bond, an obese Bond, a Welsh bond. Any Bond but James Bond.

This article was first published in the Guardian.