

2005/Jan CHARLIE HIGSON - Publishing News

James Bond is, without doubt, an iconic figure, a literary creation who debuted in 1952 in Ian Fleming's *Casino Royale* and went on to feature in 14 books over the next 12 years. A decade after the first book published, and just two years before Fleming's untimely death, the film version of *Dr No* was released and James Bond left the page to become the ultimate movie star, with a career spanning 40 years and a new movie - his 21st - slated for a 2006 release.

A tough act to follow, or, as is the way of these things, an extremely hard one to prequel. Nonetheless, it's been done and coming to your bookshelves very soon is *Silverfin*, the first of five adventures starring the young James Bond. The man behind these stories of Bond's early days is Charlie Higson - in his guises of *The Fast Show*'s Swiss Tony and Lord Ralph Mayhew, himself something of an icon. So, was there a mysterious phone call one morning, with a voice saying 'Mr Higson, we have a project for you...?'

"Sort of, yes," says Higson. "Kate Jones, my editor at Hamish Hamilton when I was writing adult thrillers, was working for Ian Fleming Publications and they'd put together a plan for doing the books; she knew my work, knew I was interested in James Bond [in fact, he got the maximum score for the subject on *Celebrity Mastermind*] and she knew my style was clean and...unliterary. So she called me." The original plan, continues Higson, was to have one writer per book but as the project progressed he found himself on a list of one, writing all of them.

"It was very good timing for me as I've got three boys of my own, six, ten and 12, I'd been wanting to write something they could read and I'd sort of started writing a book, but didn't have much impetus to carry on with it; so when Kate suggested the James Bond project it clicked very quickly and I could see how it would work." Higson didn't know he was going to be the sole creator of the series until he'd finished writing *Silverfin*, in part, he says, because the Fleming estate is very protective of its brand, cognisant of the fact that in the past it hasn't always had the treatment it deserves, and they wanted to see he could produce the goods.

The estate wanted the new books to be in the spirit of the Fleming originals, and not disrespectful or gimmicky in any way; this was to be a way of bringing in a whole new readership for whom the character only lives on the silver screen, readers who would then be ready to move onto the adult novels. “One thing we didn’t want to do was make James Bond into a teenage spy, which is a pretty ghastly concept and he obviously *wasn’t* a teenage spy - didn’t start spying until the Second World War, which is made pretty clear in the books. We also didn’t want to go down the route of him meeting a teenage M and a little Miss Money Penny, but, at the same time, we wanted there to be echoes - if you can have echoes backwards - hints and clues to the adult character and how he ended up who he is.”

In person Higson is understated, urbane, a tad self-deprecating and unlike any of his screen personas; he doesn’t crack jokes, use funny voices, à la *The Fast Show’s* office gagster Colin Hunt, or tell humorous stories, but he does have an aura of quiet confidence. And he has, in *Silverfin*, produced a thoroughly ripping yarn that manages to be at once retro - definite shades of Buchan here - and yet modern at the same time. No mean feat.

Using the small nuggets of information Fleming salted through his books, the most useful of which was an obituary for the *Times* that M wrote when they think Bond has died in *You Only Live Twice*, Higson was able to construct a childhood for the character. “Because Fleming didn’t know he was going to end up writing as many books as he did, you can see he’s slightly making things up as he goes along and a bit inconsistent with his timing, so you have to piece together what you can; there are vague mentions of things, but Fleming doesn’t give away too much of Bond’s past and so I’ve been able to project onto him what I wanted - as an adult he is this free-spirited character who’s been cut loose from any family ties, all he’s got is the secret service. What I’ve written ties in with the books, not the films, it fits in with their timescale and character.”

If anyone wants to say that making the young Bond an orphan is a bit of a cliché then, says Higson, all he has to do is point them in the direction of the books. The trickiest thing, he goes on, was the Eton factor. The estate wanted the young James to be at the school for the run of the series, but

Fleming only had him there for two terms and wrote that he was thrown out because of an incident involving a boys' maid. "This causes us a couple of problems - two terms isn't long enough for five books and secondly, although James is about 13 in the books, they're for a younger readership and can't have too much sex. I have got a very good plan for how to deal with these problems, but I can't tell you as it's a secret..."

The one thing Higson hasn't produced here is a cynical pastiche, a cardboard, two-dimensional facsimile of the mythic persona created by the film makers; *Silverfin* really feels like what might have been, and it reads like a proper adventure that would be entirely able to stand on its own, even if the central character wasn't called James Bond.