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NEW YORK FOLKLORE  
129 Jay Street  
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# The Spy Who Snubbed Me

BY FRIEDA TOTH

In 1981, I discovered the joys of James Bond.

I was shy teenager, on a date to see *For Your Eyes Only*, with a dashing blond I would later marry. We loved the film so much that we methodically went through every Bond film yet made, VCRs having just become affordable. I then, just as methodically, read every Bond book, a budding feminist with a love-hate relationship with misogynist thriller writer Ian Fleming.

If you've never read a Bond book, I'd invite you to pick one up. Fleming was a keen observer of both physical details and the human condition, and if his characters hadn't been made into such icons of pop culture, my opinion is that he'd be critically more revered. Like Dorothy

Parker or F. Scott Fitzgerald, he has an efficiency of words, and his heroes/antiheroes are similarly exaggerated.

On a personal note, as a teen, I'd never gone farther from my hometown of Glens Falls than to Rutland, Vermont. In Fleming's books, I could live the good life, explore Istanbul or Paris, play 21 in noisy casinos, dive in the warm salt water of the Caribbean, eat fabulous soft-shell crabs swimming in butter, and solve mysteries with my trusty Walther PPK. It was at odds with my Catholic schoolgirl upbringing, but I devoured the adventures, and then it happened: I read *The Spy Who Loved Me*.

If you know the movie with this title, you know nothing about the book. The book is the only attempt Fleming made to write from

a female point of view, and he was so unsuccessful that Fleming not only never tried this approach again, he refused to allow the book to come out in paperback. Although Fleming was well known as a roué, he must have been a terrible liar, for his introduction comes off as so much nonsense. He claims he found a manuscript on his desk, which he was glad to publish for the woman who left it there, a woman who had had an affair with Bond. Even at 16, I could see through that, but picked it up anyway. As usual, I was delighted to be taken away—to London, to Montreal, to Lake George.

Lake George? Ian Fleming famously wrote about places he had actually been. My antihero had been to Lake George?

How much time Fleming

spent here I have not been able to ascertain, but clearly, he was here. He sets *The Spy Who Loved Me* somewhere between Glens Falls and Lake George, in the Dreamy Pines Motor Court, where our heroine tries to hold off but is unable to escape the thugs until James Bond shows up. The "Spy" is Bond himself, not a Russian woman Bond gets mixed up with, as in the movie.

Fleming tried to write as though he were a young woman writing, just after having her heart broken, and speaking as someone in first love when I read it, he did a surprisingly good job. The giddiness, self-absorption, and myopic good spirits of early romance are uncomfortably familiar, and everything is portentous: "Before I met Kurt, I was a bird with one wing down. Now I had been shot in the other" (her take on her failed affair) (Fleming 2003, 53). "Yes, this was a man to love" (an hour or so after meeting Bond) (149).

However, she's neither the glamorous "girl" in a casino nor an ingénue on an island; she's middle class. Hers is the Lake George of the tour boats ("harmless steamers that ply up to Fort Ticonderoga and back" (62)) and of Storytown ("a terrifying babyland nightmare which I need not describe" (63)), not of Millionaires' Row.

Fleming was known for his vivid description and offers a better look at Lake George than my own diary entries in 1981. The Adirondacks are described in their wonder as Viv takes her Vespa down Route 9 from Montreal: "... there was hardly an old fort, museum, waterfall, cave or high mountain that I didn't visit. . . I just went on a kind of sightseeing splurge that was part genuine curiosity but mostly wanting to put off the day when I would have to leave these lakes and rivers and forests and hurry on to the harsh Eldollorado of the superhighways, the hot



Likely this has nothing to do with James Bond, but it is a lake halfway between Glens Falls and Lake George. The author was photographed by Rosalie Carlsen. Photo courtesy of the author.



While most authors have no control over their covers, Fleming was known to pay for his own out of pocket, as he did with this one. Photo of the original cover taken by the author.

dog stands, and the ribboning lights of neon” (62). The village of Lake George is described as “. . .the dreadful hub of tourism in the Adirondacks that has somehow managed to turn the history and the forests and the wildlife into honkytonk” (62).

Viv isn't entirely impressed by the great outdoors. “I hate pine trees. They are dark and stand very still and you can't shelter under them or climb them. They are very dirty, with a most un-treelike black dirt, and if you get this dirt mixed with their resin they make you really filthy...The only good thing about them is their smell, and, when I can get hold of it, I use pine-needle essence in my bath” (5). I happen to love pine trees, but I can't fault the description, and for a man whose house in London had no trees around it, they must have been intimidating. I'm not bothered by the assessment; that's her opinion. Or more likely, his.

Fleming describes the Adirondacks' less changeable features well, such as the pines, the sensible “picnic areas” off meandering routes, the almost comically pastoral names given by proprietors to their businesses. “Dreamy Pines” Motor Court could be a real place. We have Do-Rest, Twin Birches, Whispering Pines. Then, as now, the tourist season ended at Labor Day, or at the very least mid-October (“...wild maples

flamed here and there like shrapnel-bursts” (3)).

He also tells us about things that seemed forever at the time but aren't any more: the now-gone amusement park Gaslight Village has “real gas lighting,” the motel has toilet paper in pastel colors to match the walls (still available when I furnished my first place in 1987), and she makes her way “through the Red Indian country of Fenimore [sic] Cooper” with maps and materials from Esso (61).

Where, exactly, was she? Fleming provides us with a map, showing the Dreamy Pines Motor Court on the west side of a road with Lake George to the North and Glens Falls to the south. (He must have thought the Adirondacks were exotic indeed, as Fleming provides no such guide for adventures in Switzerland or Jamaica.) The map puts her on Route 9, but the text puts her approximately in Lake Luzerne, since she says she is “ten miles west of Lake George” (3). She can't be in Lake Luzerne, though, because the text also says she has taken “this wandering secondary road through the forest, which was a pleasant alternative route between Lake George and Glens Falls” (6). She says that halfway is a small lake called Dreamy Waters.

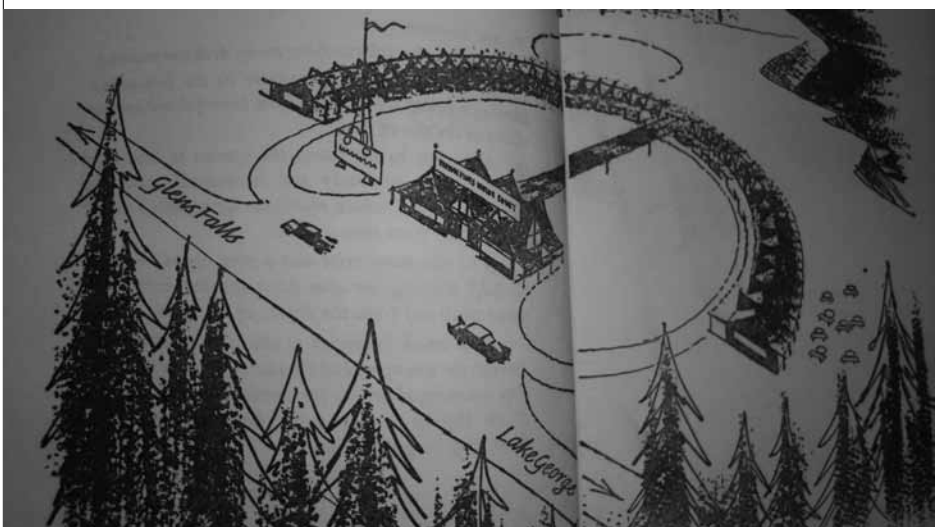
While there is no route west of Lake George that takes us to Glens Falls, there are two such roads to the east, Bay Road and 9L, and about halfway on Bay Road is a road leading to Lake Sunnyside called Dream Lake Road. There is also a route west of Route 9, which leads to Saratoga, without, however, passing through Glens Falls. This is 9N. I really couldn't fault Fleming for getting 9L and 9N mixed up, as even the natives do. Since Bond finds her on this

“secondary” road on his way south from Lake George to Glens Falls, one can assume they are on Route 9L, and that Fleming got his compass points confused, or that he deliberately altered the landscape in order to make his heroine more in need of rescue.

Fleming doesn't describe Glens Falls in detail but, again, he was here. At one point a minor baddie, the manager of the motel, is vulgarly putting the moves on Viv within his wife's hearing, and the older woman snaps, “Come on, Jed,... You can work off those urges on West Street tonight” (7). The locals know the area of ill repute has long been South Street. However, newspaper articles of the thirties describe brawls in brothels on West Street (now Broad Street), and local legend says the brothels were still there in the 1960s, when Fleming was writing.

If you are wondering where James Bond is, so did Fleming's readers. Bond doesn't show up until two-thirds of the way through, seen through the worshipful eyes of Viv. Here's where the book makes its fatal turn, the one that made readers hate it: when Bond arrives, he provides no romance.

I don't mean physical relations; there, he succeeds. But Bond shows up at the worn out motel, identifies the bad guys, announces that he'll save the day, has his victory romp, actually does save the day, and leaves. The falling action has a captain of the Glens Falls police warning Viv that the top operatives, whether FBI men, gangsters, spies or counterspies, are all “cold-hearted, cold-blooded, ruthless, tough, killers,” and she should steer clear of this type



All clear now? Phew! This simple little drawing, which illustrates more how remote Fleming thought Lake George was than anything about the area, is left out of later editions of the book. Note the abundance of those hated pine trees.





A motel much like this would have been the inspiration for Ian Fleming's locale. Balmoral Motel, Lake George, NY, junction of Rte. 9 and Rte. 9N from the Abby & Will Csaplar Lake George Collection. Courtesy of the Folklife Center at Crandall Public Library, Glens Falls, NY.

entirely (162).

The escapism, the delicious sense that Fleming has taken us somewhere wonderful, somewhere we could go if we were more cultured or well-connected, is not here. Now, the character Bond didn't do anything Fleming himself didn't enjoy, so that rules out Adirondack diversions such as fishing and horseback riding. But surely there was some way Bond could have enjoyed fine dining at Mario's, or golfing at Cronin's, or hiking in the High Peaks—all activities which delighted Fleming and all available when he was writing this novel.

No. Fleming had the common contemporary British resentment of anything American. Illustrative of this is the time Fleming went, against his will, to the Chicago Institute of Fine Arts. His first reaction was one of awe at the breadth and quality of the work he saw. Later, his host heard his outburst, "Those pictures have no goddamned right to be in Chicago!" (Lycett 1995, 263).

Fleming was well known for dismissing whole nationalities and giving a particular example a disfigurement for good measure. Here, one of the gangsters lacks body hair. And I cringed with embarrassment reading the gangster names, Horror and Sluggsy, and the lines Fleming supposed were gangster "lingo." A crudely named American without body hair and with bad grammar has got to be the lowest of them all.

For a good part of the book, Vivienne Michel is the best ever "Bond Girl," so naturally, she's Canadian, not American. Viv is from Quebec and had a Catholic education; her convent "...

proudly owns the skull of Montcalm" (15). (Another example of Fleming's attention to detail: General Montcalm was in the Lake George area at one time; he defeated Colonel Munro at Fort William Henry in 1757, and the fort is one of the few things about Lake George that Fleming has Viv admire.)

She's uncommonly independent, saving up money by working for a newspaper and then exploring the US on her own. She's the only Bond Girl with a good back story, which is most of the book, and is resourceful enough to make it believable that she has a respectable number of "shots on goal" before Bond arrives. Bond does rescue her from her attackers, but it's her wit and cool head that enable Bond to foil their larger, more nefarious scheme. And the dialogue between her and "James" gets closer to that of two equals than between Bond and most of his (for lack of a better word) partners.

It wouldn't be honest to end here without discussing the sentences that make this book notorious. Waking up, Viv reflects, "All women love semi-rape. They love to be taken. It was his sweet brutality against my bruised body that made this act of love so piercingly wonderful" (148).

At 16, I reacted to that much as I did the pine tree segment, with a shrug of: "That's her opinion. Probably his."

It is significant that here Fleming drops his façade of first person writing by saying "they" love to be taken, rather than "we." As an adult, I can barely reread this and have to add opposing quotes from the same author in *Questions Are*

*Forever: James Bond and Philosophy*: "If consent and mutual satisfaction are the measure of success—not to speak of prowess—then Bond seems to be doing very, very well indeed," and "This passage is, in fact, profoundly regrettable and revolting" (South and Held 2006, 101).

In my final assessment of *The Spy Who Loved Me*, I'm grateful to Fleming. I enjoyed the book, and I think of that speech I have to give when people ask me where I live. "In New York? You mean Manhattan, right?" "No, upstate." "You mean like Poughkeepsie?"

Ian Fleming, for all his faults, had the awareness to say, "...the Adirondacks—that vast expanse of mountains, lakes and pine forests which forms most of the northern territory of New York State" (Fleming 2003, 3). How I wish this book were popular enough that I could say, "I live near Lake George, you know, where *The Spy Who Loved Me* was set."

Somewhere on 9N, or 9L, or Bay Road, but anyway, biking distance from my house in Glens Falls, Ian Fleming looked around and sneered. In his honor, I'll sip some Virginia Gentleman Bourbon, the tippie of choice in this book and sneer back in a form of friendship.

### Some parting shots on Fleming:

On the BBC show *Desert Island Discs*, Fleming tried to explain away Bond's satyriasis. "Well I write one book a year and he has one girl [sic] per book." But then he changed course and said, "I envy him." Although biographers indicate that for sheer numbers, Fleming's experiences compare favorably with Bond's, maybe he *did* have reason to envy his creation: Fleming was occasionally turned down.

In this same interview, Fleming refers to "kind friends" who wrote with corrections on Bond's guns, drinks, or locales. One was "an American librarian." In spite of the fact that Fleming accepted this person's help, or perhaps in spite of this, James Bond never took a librarian to bed.

Through reasons "other than merit," Fleming was a Commander in the British Secret Service. Although he sat behind a desk rather than chasing villains, he was believed to be excellent.

It's commonly known that Fleming named his character after the ornithologist who wrote *Birds of the Western Caribbean*. It's less well known that Fleming was ahead of his time environmentally; he wrote to his wife a

letter that read in part, "Can you imagine such an adventure..?" to describe his participation, in 1956 in the Bahamas, in the first flamingo count since 1916 (Lycett 1995, 287).

Fleming had something of a prudish side, marrying Anne Ruthermere, in a large part, because of her pregnancy. Although that was fairly typical for the time, in Fleming's own family, it did not go without saying. When Ian's mother got unexpectedly pregnant, she left town and came back pretending to have just adopted. That daughter, Amaryllis, became a prominent cellist, and Ian was proud enough to have a cellist bearing her name in one of his later novels.

Fleming died at the age of 56. Hard living had caught up with him by his late 30s, and it is difficult to believe that Cecil Beaton's photographs in the year of his death are of a man so young. ▼

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Frieda Toth is a librarian, co-author of *Warren County: Its People and Their History Over Time*, and, like Ian Fleming, a certified scuba diver. The author is grateful for the assistance of Erica Burke and Todd DeGarmo of Crandall Public Library's Folklife Center in preparation of this article.

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