

FROM RUSSIA WITH LOVE

Directed by Terence Young
Produced by Harry Saltzman and Albert R. Broccoli
Distributed by United Artists
Released in 1964

Published in 1957, Ian Fleming's From Russia, With Love revitalized James Bond. A conspicuous improvement on the diffuse Diamonds Are Forever, the novel is highly regarded for its attention to detail and memorable characters. James Bond does not appear until Chapter 11. In the interim we are treated to in-depth studies of Kronsteen, Colonel Rosa Klebb, and Donovan 'Red' Grant. These are Bond's very worthy opponents. We learn about Klebb's predilection for torture, Grant's strange journey from moon-crazy night stalker to assassin nonpareil, and Kronsteen's challenges reconciling his disparate roles as chess Champion of Moscow and Head of Planning for SMERSH.

Then we are introduced to M.G.B. officer Tatiana Romanova, who is ordered to seduce a British spy in order to (supposedly) convey false information to the enemy during her eventual interrogation.

But she is being used. The spy—Bond—will die. Romanova will die. And the British Secret Service will be discredited in a manufactured sex scandal.

What a great setup! In much of Fleming's writing, travelogue and back-story is more interesting than plot. Happily, this imbalance between atmosphere and plot is not evidenced here. In his lesser works the plot is just an excuse to survey interesting places where the action happens to occur. Then the threadbare story is padded with examinations of the characters' backgrounds, rendered sometimes in dialogue, more often in omniscient remembrances—the lengthy examination of Ernst Stavro Blofeld's biography in Thunderball being a prime example. We get to know how a character thinks, and this knowledge deepens the reader's submersion in the narrative.

(Indeed, with books it's easy to know what a character believes if we're granted an omniscient narrator [as we are in From Russia, With Love]. Even if a character in a movie says what he's thinking, he could be lying. Yet, apart from facial expressions [ignoring the more esoteric qualities of mise-en-scene, lighting, etc.], it is only when characters speak that their feelings can be revealed. [Voice-over narration is a cinematic convention long past its sell-by date.] But as far as the *mechanics* of speech are concerned (not the veracity), when this is done in a book the writer has to make clear who is speaking at a given time. And when there's more than two characters talking it gets very tricky. The text becomes cluttered with indicators—he said this, she said that, etc. Overlapping dialogue is almost impossible in books as well, but very simple in a movie. [Going further, action works better in movies, since books tend to slow action down so the reader can grasp what is happening blow-for-blow, an especially discouraging phenomenon in a melee-type situation where a lot is happening all at once.]

It's hard to go wrong in adapting something deliberately plotted, each link in the dramatic chain carefully forged. But, nevertheless, *From Russia With Love* makes some important changes. Because the initial chapters lull us with ruminations on the distant past and

establish pertinent character traits, many fascinating details are jettisoned, particularly those concerning Soviet officialdom in-fighting. As the story moves forward, however, the more cinematic concepts are retained: the gypsy-camp girl fight and battle, shooting Krilencu amidst the tableau of a giant movie advertisement, the filming of Bond and Romanova *in flagrante delicto*, the periscope under the Soviet embassy, the mysterious death of Kerim Bay.

Gone are the examinations of the characters' worries and regrets. Fleming demonstrates his training as a journalist, exposing what makes each character tick; we are even privileged with their views of other characters. And there is poetic irony: We find out that Grant hates roses. But his villa is in a flower-growing mecca, and their "sweet stench" nauseates him. Roses are delicate and soft, but Donovan Grant is hard, ruthless. His life (to his way of thinking) improved when, years before, he was introduced to a Soviet agent—the man had roses on his desk—who decided it was worth the risk to put this hulking freak to work killing the enemies of the state. The expression 'everything's coming up roses' is apropos, as the work Grant has carved out for himself will be his very undoing.

It's very hard to make a movie out of this kind of introverted material. But with almost a third of the book jettisoned, something had to give. Producers Albert Broccoli and Harry Saltzman decided to downplay the book's obsession with death, and, instead, inject the project with a healthy dose of mindless action. (They did show *some* restraint—the early Bond adventures were not yet thrill-a-minute carnival rides.) This would give the film the proper (improper?) climax the book sorely lacked. To keep butts in the seats, the producers introduced a helicopter attack reminiscent of *North By Northwest* and a boat attack inspired by an Alan Ladd vehicle, *Paratrooper* (produced by Irving Allen and Albert Broccoli), where a bazooka is employed to blast a safe path through a minefield. Curiously, they actually complicate the plot by imposing the SMERSH revenge angle on S.P.E.C.T.R.E. Instead of vanquishing the adversary who humiliated the Russians in *Live and Let Die* (1954) and *Moonraker* (1955), Bond is targeted by Blofeld for busting the missile-toppling scheme of the first Bond film, *Dr. No*. Obviously, Fleming had not yet invented S.P.E.C.T.R.E. at the time of the novel's publication in 1957. (According to sour-grapes filmmaker Kevin McClory, it was *his* idea all along; resultant legal complications meant decades would pass before the Bond films could revisit the S.P.E.C.T.R.E. concept.) If Fleming had, the cipher machine would not be called a Spektor. But the device is just a Hitchcockian MacGuffin anyway—nothing really comes of it, and the machine is of little interest in either the book or the movie. (In the film it is dubbed the Lektor.)

The producers decided very early on to keep politics out of the films as much as possible. The Soviets aren't the bad guys here, Blofeld is. In fact, a careful study of the Bond films will reveal that the common notion that Bond is a Cold Warrior who risked obsolescence as a relevant cinematic icon with the fall of the Berlin Wall is patently untrue. The movies wouldn't get remotely political until the '80s. Four of those five films concern the Soviet Union, and then it was (in three out of those four remaining films), rogue agents associated with the Soviets who were causing the trouble. Red China—yes, *those* Communists—is the hidden power, the catalyst for calamity, in *Goldfinger* (1964) and *You Only Live Twice* (1967).

But in their hastiness to streamline the plot, important details are lost. For example, there's no explanation in the movie why Bond and Romanova take a train and not an airplane. Sure, there's some quick dialogue between Kerim and James when they first board the train

establishing that the train will be stopped just before the Bulgarian border (the conductor is a Kerim Bay ally), a car will be waiting for them, and *then* Bond and Tatiana will board an Athens-bound chartered plane—they will be in London "tomorrow morning." And yet, for some reason, when Kerim's body is discovered the train does *not* stop, and Bond makes no attempt to disembark with the Lektor! (Instead of slapping Tatiana around he should recognize things are getting out of hand, and, since his job is to deliver the Lektor, he must leave her behind [he can't trust her anymore].) In the book Bond takes the train because Tatiana stubbornly insists upon it (under orders from Klebb, who needs to close the trap on Bond). But it works, because Bond is too stupid/love struck to just lie to her face, only to drug her after he's got the Spektor, and shove her on a private plane bound for England.

The ending of the book is also much better; the film guts the book's stirring conclusion. In the movie, the confrontation with Klebb is simply a lame denouement: Tatiana isn't really beholden to Klebb, and she need only sashay up to Klebb and shoot her in the head. But it's staged like it's a real challenge for her. The film, by this point in the narrative, has already been distended by those aforementioned ill-justified, poorly staged action sequences (both of which are supposed to occur in Eastern Europe, while the craggy-rock topography screams Scotland). Admittedly, the book stumbles by letting Bond's defeat of Grant (in a precursor to the Bond film 'talking-villain syndrome' trope) result from Grant waiting for the train to enter a long tunnel before shooting Bond (supposedly so the resultant noise won't attract attention), and Grant being so cocksure that he declines to check his enemy's pulse to make sure he is actually dead! Bond stabs him with a knife and shoots him. Grant is killed in a different way in the movie, hoisted by his own petard (as it were), a capstone to one of the most memorable fights in film history.

Having escaped the constant danger of the Orient Express, the reader is caught off guard by what happens next. Fleming delights in saving his most dramatic confrontation for last. Using the information Grant (unwisely) gave him, Bond is thoroughly confused as he challenges Grant's (presumed?) contact in Paris. (The movie ends in Venice.) He suspects she is, indeed, Rosa Klebb, but the woman he is confronted with is so frail-looking and disarming that Bond is distracted just enough to give Klebb an opening to attack. She shoots at Bond with a gun concealed in a telephone, and vexes him with poisonous knitting needles she wields like "a long scorpion's sting." He pins her to the wall with a chair. But, as she is subsequently hauled away in a laundry receptacle by agents of the Deuxieme, she kicks Bond (a small knife blade concealed in her shoe bearing the same poison), and he collapses. (Reportedly, this was Fleming's attempt to kill Bond off, as he was tiring of the character.) It's really good stuff, and it gives Klebb her maleficent due, unlike the film, where Klebb is more desperate, almost pitiable.

This is characteristic of both the book and the film: the reader/viewer is two steps ahead of Bond, so there's great suspense as we wonder how Bond is going to escape this elaborate trap into which he has blithely walked. Bond is lured into danger by the prospect of procuring a Spektor/Lektor. Kronsteen correctly predicts the British will recognize the likelihood of a trap, but, eager to confront a challenge, will send Bond anyway. Sure, he's under orders. But he is hamstrung by pride and vanity—he is flattered by the idea of being irresistible to a beautiful woman, and he's overconfident, thinking he can surmount any hurdles out there in the field.

He still has a lot to learn. But Bond—in both his literary and cinematic guises—still would have many adventures in store.