

DRINKS WITH DEAD PEOPLE

QUARANTINE EDITION

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[IAN FLEMING](#)

Ian Fleming is known to history as the writer who gave the world James Bond, but spy novels weren't his only stock in trade.

THE STORY

In 1963 there was a major exhibition of rare books and printed treasures in London, displaying some four hundred historic books borrowed from dozens of libraries and private individuals, billing itself as "the most impressive collection of books ever gathered under one roof." Among other treasures, visitors could see a broadsheet copy of the Declaration of Independence and a one-of-a-kind leaf from the Gutenberg Bible. The King's College library at Cambridge was the leading exhibitor, with 51 items.

In second, with 44: *James Bond* author Ian Fleming.

Fleming was a man of action and grand ideas as much as they often seemed to elude him personally – he'd been mediocre as a student, a failure as a stockbroker, prickly with women, a bureaucrat in the war, a journalist for much of his pre-Bond writing life. He wanted to be part of the action and indeed had the temperament and the drive for it, but ended up fundamentally a cranky observer, living out his adventures in writing.

This unifying theme – essentially, a literary toolkit for the modern man (or a spy?) – made for a fascinating collection: Fleming owned first-edition Rousseau on the social contract; Einstein's relativity work, the prospectus for construction of the Suez Canal. He kept Freud and Nietzsche as well as the discovery accounts written by Darwin, Marie Curie and Alexander Graham Bell. Nor were more physical matters forgotten, as he owned Baden-Powell on the Boy Scouts, Alfred Nobel's study of dynamite, and Walter Camp's *New Way to Keep Fit*. Each book had a custom fleece-lined storage box, color-coded by topic.

Read on [at the blog](#) for more detail and resources.

DISCUSS:

What would you put in your library of, as Fleming put it, books that "made things happen"?

Who's your favorite James Bond?
(Mine's Daniel Craig.)

Fleming's Bond novels – and the movies they inspired – have been criticized for holding on to an outdated and prejudicial view of the world. Is there still a place for them?

Hi, I'm Betsy. Stuck at home? Let's learn history together, because the past helps us to understand that we are not alone. Weekday updates during #COVID19.

Questions? Comments? Say hello.

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READ MORE:

[Ian Fleming and the World of James Bond](#), Lilly Library @ Indiana University

Primary source: "[James Bond Comes to New York](#)," *The New Yorker*, April 21, 1962

[The Book Collector](#) (Fleming was this periodical's publisher)

"[Printing and the Mind of Man](#)," Harvard University Library