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Fleming may be shot like a Bond film, but its protagonist belongs in the past

Sky Atlantic's new drama about the life of Ian Fleming is high-gloss and beautiful but this gilds a disturbing portrait of violence and predation

Filipa Jodelka

The Guardian, Saturday 8 February 2014



Forget the past. The past should be discussed only at elderly relatives' birthday parties and court hearings. To reminisce about the past is like finding a skip containing the sad contents of a house clearance – a dead man's musty drawers, the odd woodwormed chair leg, a stack of dubious magazines suggesting dark sympathies – then sticking a straw in the soup of stagnant rain water at the bottom and sucking. The past belongs in the past, mate, but that's a sentiment not one single TV producer or commissioner holds in their heart.

To pass the past off as something even remotely palatable, it has to be made glossy, and

nothing matches the high gloss of Sky's new dramumentary **Fleming** (Wednesday, 9pm, Sky Atlantic) which is based on the life of James Bond creator Ian Fleming (played here by Dominic Cooper). The first thing you learn about him is what a toff he was: born into a banking family, Fleming's father was Conservative MP and friend of Churchill, Valentine Fleming. "Friend of Churchill" isn't knowing shorthand for "corpulent Lords and the murky things they get up to in the bowels of Parliament", by the way, but it should be.

Fleming is beautiful, shot like a Bond film – with approximately 892 nods to the franchise – and supplemented by loads of graphic phwoar. The action takes place during the second world war, from which Fleming was pretty much cocooned by wealth, arrogance and an assortment of creamy thighs. Two of them belong to pathologically cold Lady Ann O'Neill (Lara Pulver from Sherlock), whom he'd marry after pinching her from the second Viscount Rothermere. Also carnally acceptable is Muriel Wright (Annabelle Wallis), whose personality includes such highlights as "dumb", "pretty", "wears motorcycle leathers with nothing underneath" and "umm". If you're struggling to paint a picture, she's related to the Duchess of York.

Dealing as it does with a family of ermine miscreants, the show looks and feels luxurious, even when Fleming is unfurling reams of dickheadery. This makes for a very pretty series, because it turns out Ian Fleming was a great Flemish master of dickheadery. A platinum prick. As the French say, *une grande quunte*.

Elevated above the need to hold down a job, Fleming spends most of his time lounging around in opulence, developing sexual peccadillos and shopping. When the Hun rocks up, Mater puts in a good word with Winston and Ian saunters off into a job in naval intelligence, where he's appointed his own M, second officer Monday.

As its lead lies his way out of incompetence and boosts his scoundrel quotient on other people's money, it gradually dawns that this is an exposé of what an awful human being Ian Fleming was – except in a confusing way, where it's had loads of money pumped into it. Fleming is played by someone who possesses the good looks and likability Ian didn't, and his many smirks and raised eyebrows give off giant, throbbing referential signals, framing his nastiness as something to respect and admire. It's around the time Ann obligingly crumples into his arms like a piece of falling silk following what looks suspiciously like violent sexual assault that you start to realise you have, in fact, been staying at the Mandarin Bullshit. That your jaw is wired open, and you're being spoonfed thick, unctuous vomit from a large tureen forged from glimmering, gilded rubbish.

All this gilded luxury isn't there to occasion an uncomfortable "Hmm, I think this is called dissonance" reaction to disturbing acts of violence and sexual predation, it's a lacquer on them. It's not coercion if the surroundings are elegant enough.

So I dunno WTF this is. Maybe it's an exquisitely wrapped gift to people who believe the "PC brigade" have stopped you from saying anything any more. The ruddy good old days. I'd prefer to think of it as a swansong, though, because Fleming belongs in the past, gold-plated or not.

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