

Legends of Screenwriting “Richard Maibaum”

By Ray Morton

Screenwriters are generally a cerebral lot and not usually thought of as men (or women) of action, but Richard Maibaum certainly was, especially when it comes to writing about the adventures of a certain British secret agent with a triple digit code name and a license to kill.

Maibaum was born on May 26, 1909 in New York City. He attended New York University and the University of Iowa and then became an actor on Broadway. In 1930 he began writing plays, including 1932's *The Tree*, 1933's *Birthright*, 1935's *Sweet Mystery of Life* (with Michael Wallach and George Haight) and 1939's *See My Lawyer* (with Harry Clark). When MGM bought the rights to *Sweet Mystery of Life* to use as the basis for its 1936 film *Gold Diggers of 1937* (screenplay by Warren Duff), the studio also signed Maibaum, who moved to Hollywood and began writing for the movies. Between 1936 and 1942 he wrote or co-wrote scripts for MGM, Columbia, Twentieth Century-Fox, and Paramount, including *We Went to College* (1936), *The Bad Man of Brimstone* (1937), *The Lady and the Mob* (1939), *20 Mule Team* (1940), *I Wanted Wings* (1941), and *Ten Gentlemen from West Point* (1942). After the United States entered World War II, Richard spent several years in the Army's Combat Film Division. Following the war, Maibaum became a writer/producer at Paramount, where he wrote his first spy movie—*O.S.S.* (1946), which was based on files and research provided by the actual Office of Strategic Services. Maibaum became friends with the film's star Alan Ladd, who also starred in Maibaum's 1949 adaptation of F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*.

In the early 1950s, Ladd signed a three picture deal with Warwick Productions, a British-based production company founded by American producers Albert R. Broccoli and Irving Allen to take advantage of the Eady plan, a subsidy program designed to boost film production in the U.K. Ladd insisted that his friend Maibaum write the screenplays for the first two films – 1953's *The Red Beret* and 1954's *Hell Below Zero*. In the process, Maibaum became close friends with Broccoli, who hired Maibaum to write a number of other films for Warwick including *The Cockleshell Heroes* (1955), *Zarak* (1956), *The Man Inside* (1958), and *The Killers of Kilimanjaro* (1959). In between his Warwick assignments, Maibaum worked for other companies as well, including Fox (*Bigger Than Life* [1956] and *The Battle of Bloody Beach* [1961]) and MGM (*The Day They Robbed The Bank of England* [1961]). He also began writing for television (including several episodes of *Wagon Train* and an Emmy-nominated teleplay for *The United States Steel Hour* called “Fearful Decision”-- about a father who refuses to pay the ransom demanded by his son's kidnappers—which MGM later hired him to turn into a feature—1956's Glenn Ford starrer *Ransom*). By the end of the 1950s, Maibaum has become known as an expert author of crackerjack action tales.

Broccoli and Allen eventually dissolved their partnership and in the early 1960s Broccoli joined with Canadian producer Harry Saltzman to form Eon Productions, Ltd. The two

then made a deal with United Artists to produce a series of films based on British newspaperman Ian Fleming's popular James Bond spy novels. To write the first film in the series, Broccoli turned to Maibaum and asked him to adapt Fleming's 1961 novel *Thunderball*, about Bond's attempts to locate a hijacked nuclear warhead in the Bahamas. Maibaum wrote several drafts, but the project was aborted when Irish producer/director Kevin McClory sued Fleming, accusing him of lifting the plot for his book from a treatment that Fleming wrote with McClory and Jack Whittingham for an aborted James Bond project called *Longitude 78 West*. Not wanting their inaugural project to get held up by litigation, Broccoli and Saltzman decided to film Fleming's 1958 novel *Dr. No* instead.

Maibaum wasn't thrilled with the selection (compared to *Thunderball*, which was a realistic spy thriller, Maibaum felt that *Dr. No*—about a plot to topple the U.S. space program -- was a cheesy pulp tale and that the titular character—an evil Asian scientist with hooks instead of hands—was a ludicrous Fu Manchu knockoff rather than a credible villain). Accordingly, he and his co-author Wolf Mankowitz promoted one of the book's minor villains—a corrupt scientist named Professor Dent—and made him into the film's main bad guy. To justify the title, they gave Dent a pet monkey called Dr. No. Wanting the film to hew as closely to Fleming's novel as possible, Broccoli objected strenuously and Dr. No became human once again (although this time with a relatively restrained pair of metal hands rather than hooks). Unable to take the assignment seriously, Mankowitz resigned, but Maibaum soldiered on and ended up writing or co-writing most of the Bond films produced between 1962 and 1977 including *From Russia with Love* (1963), *Goldfinger* (1964), a reactivated *Thunderball* (1965), 1969's *On Her Majesty's Secret Service* (which Maibaum considered to be Fleming's best novel and his own best screenplay), *Diamonds Are Forever* (1971) and *The Man with the Golden Gun* (1974). (Roald Dahl and Harold Jack Bloom wrote 1967's *You Only Live Twice* and Tom Mankiewicz wrote 1973's *Live and Let Die*). After sitting out 1979's *Moonraker* (which was written by Christopher Wood), Maibaum began a partnership with series executive producer (and later producer) Michael G. Wilson (Albert R. Broccoli's stepson) and the two collaborated on the scripts for the next four Bond films—*For Your Eyes Only* (1981), *Octopussy* (1983), *A View to a Kill* (1985), and *The Living Daylights* (1987). Maibaum and Wilson devised the treatment for 1989's *Licence to Kill*, but the 1988 WGA strike prevented Maibaum from working on the actual script, which Wilson wrote on his own (although Maibaum eventually did receive a screenplay credit on the final film). Maibaum's work on the Bonds won him a number of nominations, including two WGA Awards (one for *The Spy Who Loved Me*, shared with Christopher Wood, and the second for *For Your Eyes Only*, shared with Michael G. Wilson) and three Edgars (one for *Goldfinger*, shared with Paul Dehn, the second for *Thunderball*, and the third for *Licence to Kill*, shared with Michael G. Wilson).

During his long tenure on Bond, Maibaum also worked on a number of other projects: Broccoli's 1968 production of *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang*, the 1973 television pilot *Jarret*, and the 1980 television movie *S.H.E.: Security Hazards Expert*. After Maibaum passed away on January 4, 1991, he earned two additional credits—a character creation credit on

the animated *James Bond, Jr.* television series and a story credit on Ron Howard's 1996 remake of *Ransom*.

Maibaum's contribution to the 007 screenplays cannot be underestimated. He brought sardonic wit and humor to Ian Fleming's rather grim and dour hero and logic and common sense to the authors fanciful and often quite illogical plots (for example, it was Maibaum who suggested that Goldfinger attempt to irradiate the gold supply in Fort Knox with an atomic bomb when research showed that stealing it, which was the plan in the novel, would—because gold is so heavy—take almost two weeks to accomplish).

However, Maibaum's greatest contribution—as Albert Broccoli himself noted on numerous occasions—was structure. The Bonds are famous for being collaborative efforts that utilize concepts and ideas devised by every member of the production from the producers, writers, and directors to the stunt crews, production designers, special effects teams, and actors. These clever and often outlandish ideas are what give the films their wildly imaginative edge, but organizing all of them into a coherent storyline has often proved to be quite a challenge. Maibaum was a skilled craftsman and a talented artist who was able to synthesize all of these disparate ingredients into three logical, tightly paced, and action-packed acts that were tied together with strong characterizations and clever dialogue.

Over the course of a dozen films, Maibaum helped design and perfect the famous Bond “formula” —a story featuring a dynamic, attractive, and super-capable hero fond of spouting sarcastic one liners who sets out to foil a diabolical, high stakes scheme set into motion by a colorful, larger than life villain told in a continuous series of action set pieces that climax in the death of the villain, the foiling of his scheme, and the (usually explosive) destruction of the his extremely elaborate lair. This formula has been copied so many times over the past forty-plus years (in the films of Arnold Swarzenegger, the *Die Hard* series, and numerous other successors, imitators, rip offs, and works of *homage*) that Maibaum can legitimately be considered one of the fathers of the modern action film. For this reason among many others, Richard Maibaum is a true screenwriting legend.

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