

Ian Fleming's *The Man with the Golden Gun* is often criticized as one of the weakest of the James Bond novels, and rightly so. The novel seems flat, lacking many of the details and characterizations prevalent in other Bond books. The plot at times seems forced or contrived. It is not surprising that it is one of the weaker books; Fleming wrote only a first draft of the novel near the end of his life when he was battling ill health. The author passed away before he could edit the novel, and it was published posthumously.

A reader can be forgiven for wanting for there to be some way to milk this book for more and for wishing that Fleming had been able to provide more depth to this nearly last James Bond novel. Fortunately for us readers, there actually is a way to redeem this book: get the recently knighted and most excellent actor Kenneth Branagh to read it. Even more fortunate for us readers, Branagh already has done exactly that.

Branagh, who has also read the likes of Dick Francis (*Longshot*) and C.S. Lewis (*The Magician's Nephew*), has a knack for bringing the listeners into the story so vividly that they feel like they are watching a movie—or maybe more accurately, that they are actually experiencing the story. *The Man with the Golden Gun* is no exception.

The novel begins with a man claiming to be James Bond showing up at his boss M's office at MI6. The secret service agent, however, was declared dead a year before, so people doubt the veracity of Bond's claim to be Bond. In actuality, Bond suffered a blow to the head near the end of the previous novel, *You Only Live Twice*, leaving him with amnesia.

As Bond walks into M's office, struggling with vague memories from the past, Branagh draws us into an odd tension, and we finally understand why. In the year he has been missing, Bond was captured and brainwashed by the KGB to assassinate M.

After our heart rates slow down following the assassination attempt, we are led by Branagh to tropical Jamaica for Bond's redemption assignment: To find and kill the man with the golden gun. This man is Francisco Scaramanga, leader of an international organized crime network and a murderer. Also nicknamed "Pistols," Scaramanga boasts that he kills secret service agents "for breakfast" using his gold-plated Colt .45. With the Caribbean sugar market in upheaval because of a recent hurricane, and the drug market always in demand, Scaramanga sees there is money to be made, and he is willing to do whatever it takes to be sure he is the one making that money, no matter who tries to stop him.

This is where Branagh draws us in even further. Branagh excels at creating voices for each character, so their personalities become more vivid than the mere text allows. When the Jamaican woman who manages a bordello speaks, we are convinced a Jamaican woman is speaking, completely forgetting we are listening to Kenneth Branagh!

The most amazing embodiment, however, is in the character of Scaramanga. Fleming describes Scaramanga's voice as unaccented and basically uninflected... as if everything—including killing—is uninteresting to this man. In other words, his voice is creepy simply because it is not creepy in any way. Branagh portrays this so eerily accurately that we feel it necessary to pause the audio to lock the door and make sure

the windows are shut! Again, our hearts race every time Scaramanga speaks, all because of Branagh's portrayal.

Unfortunately, Fleming did not have the opportunity to flesh out Bond's motivations and feelings in *The Man with the Golden Gun*. However, in simply reading the text, Branagh gives us insight into the character, from his guilt over his assassination attempt of M to his refusal to kill Scaramanga when the man is unarmed. We can sense the emotions under Bond's rough exterior as he tries to come to terms with what his life has become.

If Branagh had recorded a better-written book, say, *From Russia with Love*, we would be likewise engaged with the story and the character of Bond. However, we can be even more impressed that Branagh engages us equally as well with *The Man with the Golden Gun*, even though this book is sparse in description and detail. This shows Branagh's remarkable depth as an actor and a reader, as he takes us, with white knuckles, to the book's climax and denouement.

Once again, Branagh shows his depth, talent, and versatility in his rendition of *The Man with the Golden Gun*. The book may have weaknesses, but Branagh covers over them. He brings out the character of James Bond and adds a splash of color to an already adequate canvas, creating a brand new work of art.

Trisha Swift, December 2012