

FOR QUEEN & COUNTRY

*Naomie Harris' fearless Miss Moneypenney is the latest
portrayal of an iconic Bond character who now represents
a more sophisticated vision of the Secret Service*

BY LYDIA SLATER

PHOTOGRAPHS BY KOTO BOLOFO

STYLED BY MARTHA WARD





All prices on request
except where stated. This
page: Naomie Harris
wears silk and crepe
gown; embellished
silk and velvet coat,
both Ralph & Russo.
Opposite: sequined silk
and organza gown; metal
tiara; metal belt, all Elie
Saab Haute Couture

Silk chiffon gown,
£4,540, Gucci



KOTO BOLOFO

I

an Fleming declared her to be his
second favourite character.

Yet he told us almost nothing about Miss Money Penny. We know exactly what James Bond looks like (the American composer and singer Hoagy Carmichael). We are told his height, his weight, his blood pressure and the precise location of his scars (his right cheek, left shoulder and right hand, on which the initial for the Russian word for 'spy' was carved in Cyrillic by an agent of Smersh). We are informed of his favourite brands of gun, car, shirt, champagne, cigarette, even marmalade (Cooper's Vintage Oxford).

But although Miss Money Penny is a constant, if peripheral, presence throughout the Bond canon, the author's depiction of her is tantalisingly vague. In the first novel, *Casino Royale*, we learn only that she 'would have been desirable but for eyes which were cool and direct and quizzical'. In *Thunderball*, we are told a little more: she has a poodle, a crush on 007 and once worked in the cipher department. Other meaningful details about her appearance, her history or her daily existence are kept top secret.

Yet her importance, especially to the dynamic of the films, is undeniable. *Casino Royale* and *Quantum of Solace*, the two films in which she doesn't appear, are the poorer for her absence: she lends a softer, more domestic dimension to Bond. 'The Bond Girls are essentially disposable,' says Samantha Weinberg, the writer (under the pseudonym Kate Westbrook) of *The Money Penny Diaries*, a series of novels depicting Miss Money Penny's own adventures in the Secret Service. 'Either he has a fling with them and gets bored, or they die. None of them can engage him. Whereas Money Penny is the one woman who is always present in his life, but never gives in to him.'

Several women are said to have inspired Money Penny,

one being Kathleen Pettigrew, the formidable personal assistant to the MI6 director Stewart Menzies (in his initial draft of *Casino Royale*, Fleming rather lazily dubbed his character 'Miss Pettaval'). Then there was Paddy Ridsdale, a glamorous naval-intelligence secretary who assisted Fleming in his counter-intelligence efforts during World War II, famously helping him to create a fictitious identity for a corpse disguised as a drowned British officer carrying papers designed to confuse the Axis powers. 'He was always wooing me with presents of silk stockings and lipstick from strange places,' Ridsdale once recalled of Fleming. 'But I was never taken in by his charm because I knew what he was like. He was always on the telephone to different women, taking them to lunch and dinner at the Ritz. He had so many girlfriends that I was not tempted to become one of them.' It all sounds rather familiar...

Another rumoured model was Joan Bright Astley, who organised the Special Information Centre for Winston Churchill during World War II and, unlike Ridsdale, did date Fleming, later describing him as 'attractive and fun' but also 'ruthless'.

Nevertheless, despite the existence of such real-life inspirations, Miss Money Penny herself remains elusive. In many ways, the lack of specific detail about her has proved a godsend for the film-makers, thus given the freedom to interpret M's faithful secretary according to their own preference, and to suit the mores of the times.

Lois Maxwell – the Miss Money Penny of my own childhood – played her as efficient and maternally flirtatious. (Interestingly, she looked rather like photographs of Paddy Ridsdale, and when she met Fleming on the set of *Dr No*, says Weinberg, 'he told her, "You're exactly how I imagined Money Penny, warm and intelligent with the most sensual lips."') In order to create their on-screen chemistry, Maxwell



This page: tulle and silk gown, Giambattista Valli Haute Couture. Platinum and diamond earrings, £12,600, Tiffany & Co. White gold and diamond ring, £4,200, Cartier. Opposite: jacquard dress, £4,795, Alexander McQueen. Platinum and diamond earrings, Jessica McCormack



Sequined silk
and organza gown;
metal tiara; metal
belt, all Elie Saab
Haute Couture



and Sean Connery concocted a back story for their characters, imagining a single night of passion in a country cottage before they renounced each other for the call of duty. Manning the desk in *The Living Daylights* and *Licence to Kill*, Caroline Bliss played her as a more traditional secretary, blonde, bespectacled, bun-wearing and openly needy. Samantha Bond, Money Penny in four films opposite Pierce Brosnan, was sarcastic and witty, apparently independent, yet secretly a worshipper at 007's well-polished brogues.

Naomie Harris' Money Penny is another creature entirely. At the start of *Skyfall*, she is presented to us as a gun-toting secret agent – one who shoots Bond, apparently fatally, before the opening credits have even rolled.

Moreover, she is black. It says a good deal for Harris' portrayal that, while mere speculation about a black Bond is enough to make headlines around the world, Harris stepped straight into Money Penny's kitten heels without a wobble. 'I think I was very lucky that it was never revealed I was Money Penny until the movie was already out,' she says. 'People didn't have a chance to say, "Oh no, we don't want a black Money Penny," because they didn't know she was coming. And when they saw the film, they thought, hopefully, "OK, we can live with her." So there were no objections, which I'm really happy about.'

We have arranged to meet at Dukes hotel in Mayfair, a favourite haunt of Ian Fleming's, which still purveys a world-famous martini. On my way there down St James's Street, past the gentlemen's clubs, the gun shop and the cigar merchant, I have the impression of walking back in time, into Bond's 1950s heyday with its comfortable certainties of white, male, Western supremacy. But this impression is instantly dispelled when I find Harris, closeted in the hotel's pink and green Perrier-Jouët lounge, sipping a cup of camomile tea, having firmly rejected anything shaken, stirred or sparkling. 'I don't drink alcohol at all, ever,' she says. 'I just don't like it.'

Harris has come straight from the front row of the London Fashion Week shows and is elegant in a white

lace Burberry top and white fringed skirt and shod in spike-heel Burberry sandals. She is certainly beautiful – long-limbed and lissom, with eyes the colour of Lyle's Golden Syrup – but the overwhelming impression is of cool intelligence. The James Bond of the books would undoubtedly have found her mere presence an assault on his masculinity.

Harris has never been shy of taking on tough roles, having played a zombie-slayer in *28 Days Later*, a mystical voodoo witch in *Pirates of the Caribbean* and the controversial figure of Winnie Mandela in the critically acclaimed *Mandela: Long Walk to Freedom*. Consequently, when she was approached by the director Sam Mendes, who had seen her in the National Theatre's production of *Frankenstein*, and was asked to audition for a Bond Girl role, she admits to being a little bemused. 'I thought, "I don't think I can be a Bond Girl,"' she says with a throaty chuckle.

Harris grew up in the Roger Moore era, when female characters in the franchise were particularly cartoonish, 'so I always associated them with being very sexual and sensual, and that's not what I associate with myself. I'm really uncomfortable when the label of "beautiful" is put on a character. It makes me feel I can't live up to it, somehow'. For in her head, Harris says, she still imagines a 'sexy' woman to be a curvaceous blonde.

Consequently, she went to her audition without nerves. 'I thought, "This is good practice and it's great to meet Sam Mendes, so just go in and do it.'" It was only on her final audition that Harris was told she was in fact in the running to play Miss Money Penny. "And I was like, "Oh, that makes sense! OK, now I get it!"' she says, glowing.

Further endorsement came from an MI6 operative, to whom she was introduced in order to research her role. 'This person told me I would be an ideal candidate,' she says. 'They said, "You're perfect. No one would ever think you were an agent, and people tell you more than they should, which is the ideal skill to have.'" The fact that she had studied at Cambridge (she read social and political science at Pembroke) was another plus. 'I realised that

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I could do it. Naomi Harris could do it. It all seemed very possible from that point onwards.'

Brought up in north London by her mother, a screen-writer turned healer, to whom she remains very close, she began acting professionally at the age of nine, and from the start assumed a responsibility not to let women down on screen. 'I have always felt that kind of mission,' she says, unconsciously adopting secret-agent terminology. 'I was never going to play stereotyped roles, and I was always going to show women, and particularly black women, in a positive light... I'm a feminist, and it's very important to me to reflect that.'

At times, this approach has brought her into collision with directors; she has always refused to disrobe on screen, for instance. 'I don't feel it's part of my job,' she explains. 'I don't like this sexualisation and objectification. It's not what I'm about at all.'

What intrigued her about the Moneypenny role was the opportunity to transform how the character would be perceived for a new generation. 'Sam talked to me about his vision for Moneypenny and how he wanted her to be completely modernised, really different, a woman who women in the audience could identify with and admire. That's precisely the kind of role I love to play. So I was really excited about it.'

All the same... whereas at the start of *Skyfall* Moneypenny is a field agent and Bond works to a female boss, by the end, normal service, as Fleming would have understood it, has been resumed. Ralph Fiennes is in charge, and Moneypenny is at a desk, rather than driving a Range Rover through a crowded street market in Istanbul.

Harris regrets the death of Judi Dench's M. 'Of course, Ralph is an amazing actor, but I do miss Judi. I think she was the beating heart of the Bond movies. There was something so tough but also warm about her, and just having that female energy is different.' But her Eve Moneypenny is much more than a secretary, she insists. 'She's M's right-hand woman. She wants to stay in the Service, but she knows her limitations now. In *Spectre*, you see an older, wiser Moneypenny.' We also see a new dimension to

her partnership with Bond. 'Bond has a hunch, he's out on this lone mission and everyone thinks he's gone off the rails because of the death of M. He chooses Moneypenny as the only person to divulge what he's really going through and what's going on, and asks for her help. So I feel as though they have a much stronger and more mutually respectful relationship.' But it is still unconsummated. 'The great thing about Moneypenny is that she's not willing to cross that line, because for her the job is more important than the man. There's something really powerful about that decision.'

One gets the impression that Harris might also be talking about herself here. She comes across as delightfully warm and unpretentious, yet you sense that she too has a core of steel, and that for her, too, the job is what matters most. She has recently celebrated her 39th birthday, but has no worries about whether she ought to be settling down

and having children while she still can. 'Just now, when I was at the shows with my friend,' she says thoughtfully, 'she told me she didn't believe anyone could be truly happy until they had children. I thought, "Could that be true? Or maybe it's just true for her." I don't know, but I'm quite happy not knowing,' she concludes. 'I've seen my friends get into marriages and relationships that really don't make them happy, but they're doing it because they're fulfilling society's expectations of what they should be doing at a certain age. I never want to do that.'

She won't reveal whether she is currently in a relationship. 'I never talk about it,' she says calmly. In our over-scrutinised era, for an actress of Harris' international renown to have kept her private life so effectively under the radar is an impressive achievement. I can only conclude that the man – or woman – from MI6 who said she'd make a perfect spy knew what they were talking about. Having redefined Miss Moneypenny for a new generation, perhaps it's time Harris had a proper shot at 007... □

'Spectre' is in cinemas now.

'THE GREAT THING ABOUT MONEYPENNY IS THAT, FOR HER, THE JOB IS MORE IMPORTANT THAN THE MAN'

Silk gown; silk shoes, both Ralph & Russo. White gold and diamond ring (just seen), £4,200, Cartier. See Stockists for details. Hair by Ben Jones at Jed Root, using Phyto. Make-up by Alex Babsky at Jed Root, using Lancôme. Manicure by Michelle Humphry at LMC Worldwide, using Maybelline New York. Stylist's assistant: Lucy Kebbell. Horse: Pearl of Peace EV at PetLondon Models. Shot at Althorp (www.spencerofalthorp.om)

