

Firearms and Writers

by Jim Guigli

In the opening scene of *Casino Royale* (2006), a British traitor returns at night to his office and finds his wall safe open. He turns and sees James Bond waiting in a chair. The man moves to his desk and opens a drawer exposing a large pistol. He argues with Bond and then draws the pistol to shoot Bond. When he pulls the trigger he is shocked and disappointed to hear a dull mechanical click instead of a gunshot.

Before you conclude that I am going to be critical, know that I love this movie and own the DVD. You have to suspend disbelief in so many places and in so many ways to enjoy this film that it would be ludicrous to nitpick one part of one small scene. But I do want to use it as an example of the difficulties encountered when writing about firearms.

I ask you, if that were your gun, one you kept in your desk for last-line-of-defense protection, would you know whether Bond had unloaded your pistol? Would you be able to feel the loss in weight of at least seven cartridges and the magazine?

The truth is that people who work with the same gun for an extended period of time probably would. (And, if Bond had cracked your safe, why wouldn't he look in your desk, too?)

This, I offer, as one of the mistaken assumptions writers, both in novels and film, make about firearms. Here are seven briefly sketched examples, which I hope will get writers thinking before they use firearms in their stories.

1. THE UNLOADED FIREARM

He snatched his pistol from the drawer and pulled the trigger, but nothing happened. The gun was unloaded. He had no clue!

The compact Colt Officers model .45 cal., a medium-sized semi-automatic pistol, weighs 2 lbs. 6 ounces fully loaded. Removing the loaded magazine and chambered round (7 rounds total) reduces the weight by 7 ounces, or 18 percent.

The difference in weight from loaded to unloaded in a pistol with large double-row magazine capacity (11 rounds plus) will be even more noticeable, and again more if the pistol frame is light-weight aluminum or plastic instead of steel.

A Smith & Wesson Model 10 .38 special police revolver (ubiquitous until the eighties) also weighs 2 lbs. 6 ounces, but six rounds of standard issue ammunition weigh only 3 ounces. The difference in weight from loaded to unloaded is only 8 percent. (All weights are approximate.)

If you want to do the *he didn't know his gun was unloaded* thing, I suggest that you stick with large revolvers and avoid semi-automatic pistols, especially those with heavy double-row magazines.

2. THE "SAFETY" ON A REVOLVER

Just before he shot, he thumbed off the safety on the left side of his revolver.

He was shocked when the cylinder flopped open and some of his ammunition spilled to the floor! (At least no one had unloaded it first.)

That nice thumb tab on the left side of the revolver's frame that looks like a safety release is actually the latch that opens the cylinder so that you can load and unload the cartridges.

Almost all double-action (pulling the trigger cocks and releases the hammer) revolvers have an internal automatic safety that blocks the hammer from touching the firing pin until the trigger is pulled. They don't have an external safety.

(Semi-autos have many safety variations, and can have many levers. Watch out.)

3. YOU CAN'T MISS WITH A SHOTGUN

Just poke it through the door and one round will hit everything in the room.

After Duke emptied his semi-auto 12-gauge into the small room, assaulting himself with noise, concussion, and burnt powder, the unwounded perp grabbed the warm barrel of the shotgun and took it away from the astonished Duke.

Even from a sawed-off shotgun, whether bird shot or buckshot, the shot cluster will spread at most to the size of a cantaloupe across a small room. At ten feet or ten yards, whether you hit or miss depends on where you point the gun.

4. THE PISTOL/SHOTGUN/RIFLE AND MECHANICS

When the shot hit him, he was blown across the room.

What would Sir Isaac Newton say?

Newton's Third Law of Motion states that for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction. That means that if your shotgun produced enough force to blow a man across the room – and trust me, it doesn't– you would have to resist an equal force right back at you. Even if your back and shoulder were braced against a wall, such a force would smash your shoulder. If you weren't against a wall you would be, just like the guy you shot, *blown across the room*.

5. IT HURTS – ADRENELIN ONLY COVERS SO MUCH

He shoots and shoots and it only hurts if he gets shot. He could shoot all day!

The sound of gunfire assaults the ears and can do permanent damage to your hearing. Even with ear protection, full-load ammunition fired from large-caliber pistols and short-barreled 12-gauge shotguns produces shock waves in the air that beat on your forehead. Fire 100 rounds of full strength 12-gauge in an afternoon and you're on your way to a good headache.

And, if you don't cup the butt of that shotgun into your shoulder, it's going to hurt. Your bicep muscle is not a shock absorber. Nor is your lip when the shotgun shoves the back of your thumb into your face.

6. HUNNERTS 'N' HUNNERTS O' BULLETS

Can his 30-round magazine hold 100 rounds?

Arithmetic is arithmetic. Until gun designers provide ammunition that replicates itself in the gun while our hero is shooting, a 30-round magazine only holds 30 rounds. Even if the hero can't count, the writer should.

7. JUST TUCK THAT PISTOL INTO YOUR WAISTBAND

It embarrassed him when his pistol slid from his waistband down his pant leg, bounced off his shin, and slid across the floor of the mall. Should he have worn boots to catch the gun?

Most guns are heavy. They don't want to stay where you put them, even when you are sitting. It gets worse when you run. They can fall out of even well-made holsters.

If I haven't convinced you that waistbands aren't holsters, I could refer you to a gunsmith I knew who tucked a cowboy six-shooter into his waistband. When the gun went off, the bullet nicked part of his romantic gear.

If this all sounds too daunting, you can write around it, but you don't have to join a gun club to have access to useful, accurate information. Books on guns and shooting are available in libraries and used book outlets, and magazine stands usually have at least one gun magazine.

You have only to provide a few accurate details pertinent to your story, and resist the temptation to shower your story with excessive detail or jargon (*He drew his Whizbang 405 with the laser sights and threw the lever that enabled SAS mode.*), to make a good story better.

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