

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Perfect Tense

Michael Bracewell

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Michael Bracewell was born in 1958. The author of two novellas, three novels and a study of English culture, *England is Mine*, he writes regularly on music, art and literature for the *Independent on Sunday* and *Frieze* magazine.

ALSO BY MICHAEL BRACEWELL

Fiction

The Crypto-Amnesia Club

Missing Margate

Divine Concepts of Physical Beauty

The Conclave

Saint Rachel

Non-Fiction

England is Mine

PERFECT TENSE

Michael Bracewell



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ONE

Work is a blessing. I keep repeating this to myself, whenever I feel like chucking the whole thing in. Because worse than work, far worse, is not working. And I'm not just talking about the people who sleep in parks, or the people who get laid off when they've got a family to feed. I'm talking about the rest of us, the ones with jobs and wages, who still manage to spend half of the time wishing that we could blow the whole caboodle sky high, and the other half simply feeling tired.

Of course, I'm thinking of people with jobs like mine: the stragglers in the race of an office career, disqualified from the fast track by our fundamental lack of interest in winning. But even then, work is a blessing. I say this - just on the wrong side of forty - because work, ultimately, is the one thing that keeps the rest in place. It's difficult to show you what I mean - unless you share my dread of public holidays.

On public holidays, I like to go for long walks around the quiet streets of the City, looking at the empty offices and peering through the windows of the darkened, scrubbed-down coffee bars. I know it sounds ridiculous, but I find them reassuring - those frontages of mirrored glass, and the reception desks with their bored security men, dozing in high-backed leather chairs. These are the sights which keep my fear of redundancy at bay. Because it's easy to feel redundant, even when you're harnessed to the office and perfectly aware of all the other poor sods who really have lost their jobs. Redundancy can be a feeling in your head as well. It's the feeling of having nowhere to go - or, 'nowhere to go but indoors', as someone once put it. And I can't think of a better definition. To feel that bored, and that irrelevant;

to be adrift, and no longer connected to life, so that nothing – neither effort nor reward – can justify your getting up or sleeping. And it can happen when you least expect it.

You might be wondering who I am, or what I look like. It doesn't matter. You wouldn't look twice if you saw me on the train. I look just like everyone else. And I suppose that I am just like everyone else, when you get down to it. But I ought to say 'male, white, British'. And you could add 'white-collar-low-to-middle-income-bracket-suburban-but-has-read-a-few-books' if you wanted.

But once, nearly twenty years ago, back in the summer of 1980, I was on my way to the office when I suddenly decided to bunk off for the day. It was early June, a cloudless morning, and the sun was already hot. I was walking over London Bridge – back in those days I was working near the Monument, and I used to walk over the bridge every day, from the station – and I was looking at the sunlight on the river.

When I narrowed my eyes so that they were nearly closed, the glints of light on the water became a single sparkling mass, dazzling white, flickering on black. And when I tried to look ahead again, the glare of the sunshine was so bright that I had to stare down at the pavement as I walked along. All around me, the workers were streaming in to the City. I was always fascinated by the different speeds at which they walked. Their lives were in their walks, if you know what I mean. Some strolled, disdainful of a rush which questioned their status, or demonstrating an ease which seemed distinctly continental; others hurried at a frantic pace, their jackets over one arm and the sweat on their shoulders already making their shirts stick to their backs. These were the ones who sometimes talked to themselves as they rushed along, as though they were rehearsing their defence for some accusation which was going to be hurled at them the moment they got into the office.

Then there were those who actually marched over the bridge: the officer class of the old guard, the umbrella-tappers who bore themselves erect, staring ahead with watery eyes which seemed to reveal only the dullest intelligence, but conveyed an air of complete disapproval of anything which didn't belong to their world.

But what was their world? They were a dying breed, dinosaurs even then, and soon their City - the City of tailcoats and wing collars almost - would be buried for good beneath the new generation of radical architecture and lean young men with American qualifications and Swiss passports. And yet the idea of this old guard would linger, in the furnishings of wine bars and those dark, busy little shops where men with silver hair sold hand-made shirts to graduates with toned bodies and fat pens. But it was only the idea of the old guard that remained; and that was the factor - it seemed more like a process - which interested me. That here would be a crumbling chunk of history which would remain present in a feeble dilution of its ambience, like those new pubs on old City sites where they keep a fragment of medieval masonry on display behind a sheet of perspex which is soon covered in greasy thumb prints.

Not that I could give a toss about medieval masonry, or the old guard of the City for that matter. No, what held my attention was the fact that I was witnessing a time when most things, including hard cash and our perception of reality itself, were about to be turned into an idea of themselves. Perhaps it has always been that way, but some time around the early Eighties I began to notice the insistence of image over substance. And this insistence began to pester me, like a bad radio station that you can't turn off. And now I find I still can't turn it off.

Anyway, getting back to that morning in early June; there I was, walking over London Bridge and looking at the buildings as they seemed to absorb the light, and I knew that the sky would turn a deeper and deeper shade of blue

as the day wore on. And I don't know why, but there seemed to be something ancient, and monolithic, about the sides of those high buildings as they faced the glare of the sun.

And so I stopped and looked some more: at the jewels of light on the surface of the river and at the brooding, imperial edifice of the City.

The day seemed to urge adventure, whispering the promise from some mysterious side street that exploration would find its reward, by evening, of an extraordinary experience; that with dusk, when the clearing streets were soft and grey, I would have found a treasure which made the City, and everything in it or of it, my own. I had only to search.

Slightly drunk with the thought that I was actually going to step off the treadmill, I stood for a moment longer on the bridge. I could feel the ascending sun hot on the back of my head as I wavered in a sudden crowd of choices. I have always been incapable of making quick decisions, as more than one line manager has written on my annual assessment form, and the decision of what to do with a stolen day of freedom - following so fast on the initial decision not to go into the office - was all but too much for me. But I also felt that I had been challenged by the City, or by the whole of London, not simply to be worthy of its complexity, depth and grandeur, but also (in my arrogance) to prove my spiritual superiority over my fellow workers, who even now were heading towards their allotted offices with the expression, serene or anxious, of those who start their day a little late.

I was an outlaw already: a criminal who was contemptuous, even, of the lassitude offered by flexitime. With each passing minute, as I plunged through the undergrowth of that forbidden territory which flanks the straight and narrow path of core office hours, I was accumulating a responsibility to my crime which would be

the first test of my endurance. Soon, the sensation of drunkenness had given way to a thick-headed feeling of concussion, accompanied by an actual dizziness which I could only attribute to the warmth of the sun, or nerves. The edges of my peripheral vision began to darken. I thought that I was either going to faint or throw up. I moved to one side of the pavement and leaned against the smooth stone of the balustrade, my hands pressing lightly upon it. Steadying myself, and catching just the lightest breeze off the river, my head began to clear. But I seized almost gratefully on my sudden dead drop into nausea. I would have to find a telephone box and phone in sick.

Because I had my back to the passing workers I began to feel conspicuous, and so I turned around again, this time being careful not to catch anyone's eye, and look as though I was taking the time to judge them. This was not a location, at that time of day, in which it was usual to be stationary; and I attracted a succession of sideways glances, none of which were accusatory in themselves, but all of which - because of their very brevity and apparent indifference - seemed to be saying, 'We've met your type before, and we haven't got the time, or the interest, frankly, to get involved with whatever little mess of deceit you might be concocting so as not to go into the office. And by the way, if you're not with us, then you're against us.'

But it wasn't - it isn't - a question of being either for or against my fellow workers. For as long as I can remember, I have had an equal mistrust of organized authority and organized rebellion - of obedience to conformity and obedience to non-conformity. I'm inclined towards aspects of both, but I seem to have a reflex which tends towards the opposite of any given orthodoxy. Show me a strutting rebel and I'll want to be a humourless bourgeois; sit me in a room filled with high-powered executives and I'll probably yawn in their faces. Is this so odd, I wonder?