

TLC Showcase

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Lock Up Your Cat: TLC at Long Odds

A parlour game or competition to create the worst possible novel-fronting cover letter - one that ensured not a single word of a possibly good book would ever be read, with a moment's glance taken at so much as the title page meaning defeat and some horrible forfeit - might, if insult and illiteracy be disallowed, prove more difficult than it sounds.

Publication history: none whatsoever. For genre choose the established pariah, literary novel, 100,000 words. Add a theme to give the impression nothing much happens - friendship, maybe, with perhaps a mention of broken dreams and disillusionment or regret to suggest dreary garret-bound navel-gazing and a downbeat end; and as garnish some kind of loony twist, such maybe as a reference to sin - not guilt, palatably pastel-shaded and referent to nothing in particular - and not as a mannered synonym of adultery, but sin in its native unreconstructed hue, guaranteed to give the healthy post-modern gender-neutral westerner that creeping suppository non-ironic chill of he'll-come-to-my-house-in-the-dead-of-the-night-and-nail-my-cat-to-the-door. Finally, in case all that fails, make it nearly impossible for them to meet you even if they are interested.

And if you do all that, you will essentially have my cover letter.

I do not recall how I stumbled across The Literary Consultancy. Probably I was hooked by the prospect of their recommendation in suitable quarters - *strictly by invitation only*, I think it said, but I was quietly confident and even if that did not transpire I supposed that six hundred quid to have 100,000+ words read by someone inside the business was hardly exorbitant. It turned out to be rather a steal.

Your manuscript was sent to Matthew Branton, I was told. He takes a lot of our more unusual contemporary fiction. This sounded arcanelly euphemistic regarding him or me or both. When a little research revealed an author of several well-received novels who exercised himself by skateboarding naked down a mountain and ranting, though, I was not discouraged: I had not wanted an academic. There were a million young men unaccounted for in the last UK census, he said in an interview. He was one, and I was another.

When the report arrived, my first thought was that it was all over much too soon. How I would have liked more. I had thought the scale of possibilities ranged from a gratification of vanity and offer of support to a comprehensive but constructive kicking, but in fact I got the best of both worlds. The validation was there - *accomplished novel...deft writing, memorable characters, sharp dialogue, humour, wisdom and evocative observation...intricately interwoven plot strands...compelling impact...special...real pleasure to read...original, rewarding and moving* - but so too was my nagging suspicion confirmed in black and white: the

beginning did not work. The manifold failings of the opening section were duly and convincingly itemised. The initial antecedents of those first chapters had been written by a rank beginner, and their execrability was making itself atavistically felt many generations later. I was advised to come up with something that did better justice to the rest and then get in touch with in-house talent scout Caroline McCarthy.

I did the second when I thought I had done the first. She disagreed, rightly. I tried again. She relented. Then she went on maternity leave and the case was taken over by TLC director Rebecca Swift, whose enthusiasm and generosity have sustained it since. Following a highly complimentary rejection letter from a might-have-been-publisher which echoed the sentiments of the TLC report, I set about making fundamental changes that altered the whole architecture of the novel. Rebecca offered to look again when it was done, and I held her to her word. Such were the changes that she suggested a whole new report on the first 100 pages, which I understood as her polite way of saying that I had come to the end of my free entitlements and it was time to put another coin in the meter. I was far from resenting it - everyone has bills to pay - but it caught me rather on the financial hop as I had just been forced into an unplanned extra foreign holiday to evacuate my children from the noxious Moscow smog. I cheekily asked if I might be eligible for any sort of members' discount, and was astonished to be offered the reading and report absolutely gratis as *you are a deserving writer and the bursary is designed to help high quality, low-income users*. Please take a moment to consider that in the light of the first paragraphs above. The existence of such a thing at the current time I find impressive in itself, but to offer it to someone with my cover letter verges, at least to me, on the heroic.

And so it came to pass that Matthew's skills were called on - and given - once more, and the opening part's many faults now boiled down to just one: there was too much of it. And this time I was merciless, cutting blithely away at what long seemed a requisite minimum until every suspect chapter was slimmed by 20-30% to a previously unimagined fighting weight. Rebecca Swift meanwhile suggested submitting an extract to Wayne Burrows of Staple Magazine for the purpose of their joint showcase, so the following is a snippet from the opening chapter.

To her and Matthew Branton I record enormous thanks again.

Extract from *Thieves in the Night*

He got the drinks and buried himself in that corner. I thought he had said they were friends, but assuming they were not brother and sister I supposed he had used the word loosely. Wondering what it must be to possess the possessor of that voice I looked again at the fortunate man with the shadows around his eyes, and he leant over to whisper:

“I’m sure this song ain’t hers.”

He scowled down at his bitten fingernails as the voice soared again from the slender figure on the high wooden stool.

“All of your history has little to do with your face;

You’re mainly a mystery with violence filling in space...”

The radiated heat rose; sweaty condensation dripped from the two-metre ceiling onto the mass of bodies in the pit; the atmosphere grew close, embracing; on the swankier upper deck even the executives on their daytrips to bohemia shut up about gym memberships and car insurance.

Hardly anyone moved until near the end of the last song, when two nubile blonde shampoo advertisements squeezed past in front of us and I felt the eyes of my companion – the mystery with violence filling in space – tracking them like security cameras.

“Oh love is gentle,

Love is kind,

As gay as a jewel

When first it’s new...”

They pushed on through the crowded heat towards the alley door. The mystery craned his neck to keep them in sight to the last.

“But love grows old

And waxes cold

And fades away

Like the morning dew...”

She came off to cheers of gratitude for an evening improbably salvaged, a perk of the job if you were one of the elect. Presumably the mystery would have to go and congratulate her, but it was always better to allow time for any hangers-on to get bored with each other and disperse.

He waved his empty bottle; he had a way of holding them as a mechanic holds a wrench.

“Your turn. Not going yet, are you?”

“I suppose not...”

“See you back outside then,” he said, and winked. “I can’t breathe in here.”

I supposed it was safe by now so I went and waited under a signed photograph of a young Michael Caine for the attention of the resident barman, a Latino collision of a million clichés who served women before men regardless of waiting time and broke out in occasional black eyes.

“Oo’s a-next? *Bella signorina!*”

The signorina, newly descended, was edging through and humouring without enthusiasm a coterie of the Waste Land regulars.

“Thanks very much love...glad you enjoyed yourself...Is that right?... No, I can’t say I have...”

I had somehow expected more, but then without warning across the beerguts and banalities her eyes met mine and she smiled, subtly and only at me, as if reading my thoughts and reproaching without malice my lack of faith. She had been adopted as pilot-fish by a sweating human lobster with seedy eyes and a parting that started from his armpit.

“So Keith Richards turns around to me and he goes, ‘Alan, you are a nutter...’”

She escaped him through a gap that had not seemed to be there and glided into the corner beside me.

“*Bella signorina!*”

He was not the last barman I would see serve her instantly, but from him it was no distinction.

“A double Gordon that’s dry enough to sleep in, and two beers.”

Reflections of light from his gel and jewellery gambolled among the rows of shot glasses, and he did his best to look ravishing while he was at it. I wondered who she was buying for – I could not imagine her wanting for company but I would have expected the company to buy for her, and that they did not was a vicarious disappointment. She dropped a note onto the bar and turned to me with a gamine upturn of mouth and eyes that had not been worn for the crowd.

“It seems a certain friend of mine doesn’t see fit to introduce us. I wonder why.”

Even her speech sounded like singing.

“Ten years a bodyguard,” a voice blurted desperately over the general babble from about five feet above the floor. “I been shot, stabbed...disembowelled...”

She raised the glass and drank through unparted lips; her smoky eyes teased over the rim, and behind them was assurance like a hazily

visible mountain, looking as easily and as recently ruffled.

“You see a lot from that stage, don’t you?” I said to her, resisting with what nonchalance I could the efforts of thirsty and envious elbows to relocate me. “Maybe he doesn’t find me very introductive.”

“Oh, I get the impression he likes you, and God knows he doesn’t like many. There must be something about you – you don’t look like one of his friends.”

“So what do his friends look like?”

Her eyes left mine and rolled down over me unabashed, darkly curtained by her hair, warmly mischievous, and they calculated the chance of my knowing any of those friends to be precisely nil.

“Do you watch fantasy films?”

“No, why?”

“Who are the big ugly lunks who sit in filthy caves chewing dwarf and goblin bones? Is that trolls or orcs?”

“Trolls, I think. *Lord of the Rings* is as far as my experience goes, and I was a kid when I read that.”

“You’re not much more now,” she said. “Books weren’t invented when I was a kid. Not where I lived. I saw someone mention *Lord of the Rings* to my dad once and he made clear he’d heard of it, though he had the idea it was some sort of gay porn... Anyway, trolls. That’s who they look like.”

She took a step away from the bar, off back to whoever she was with.

I said, “Where do they get the bones?”

Her smile remained, but something in it changed as though a cloud had crossed the sun.

“You’ll find out.”

She began to move away again but turned back, hesitant with unwonted indecision.

“Be careful, whoever you are, with him.”

Another instant and she was into the crowd, but she would not have explained then anyway.

“Oo’s a-next? Yes-a-mate?”

I turned and found the two beer bottles waiting on the bar. They were for the mystery and me.

About the Writer

Brendan Ball was born and grew up in London and Kent. After an ill-fated and abortive stint reading English Literature at Cambridge he spent several years in London as a musician and other things before ending up in Moscow working as an English teacher and examiner. The extract here is from his unpublished novel *Thieves in the Night* written in Moscow between 2003 and 2010. He is married with two children.

