

TLC Showcase

Jude Cook



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A Note from the Author

The Party Official began after a call for submissions by Courttia Newland on the theme of 'The Global Village'. This I heard about via Becky Swift, after an extract from my first novel won the Writers' and Artists' Yearbook competition judged by TLC. The story started high concept – a medical mix-up leads to some grim comedy – and ended rather more philosophically, with a racist's epiphany and his faltering first steps on the road to tolerance. Not quite right for Courttia, so instead Wayne Burrows picked it up for Staple Magazine. The story is now also a short film script, with a couple of directors interested in producing it in 2011. Timely, maybe, with the rise of the grisly English Defence League. **The Kind Mistress – Posterity's Warm Embrace** began when Becky Swift asked me to write something for Staple's publishing issue, which she was then editing. She enquired whether I might produce 2,000 words about the wonderful experience of not getting published. This being too grim to contemplate, I suggested something about what happens after the work is out there; how an invisible race for prominence and permanence begins, whether an author likes it or not. After Becky suggested adding something about e-posterity, the piece was packed off to eternity in Staple 69/70.

The Kind Mistress: Posterity's Warm Embrace

By Jude Cook

There is a droll moment – one of many – in Alan Bennett's play *Kafka's Dick* where the apparition of the great author (metamorphosed into human form from the unlikely carapace of a tortoise, sixty years after his early death from TB) stands conversing with contemporary characters in a suburban living room. Everything is going swimmingly until someone describes the pale Czech as a 'leading light in European literature.' At which point, old Franz turns to the audience and exclaims, 'What is this about a leading figure in European literature . . . ?' He'd had *no idea*. No, really. He hadn't even hankered after such a reputation while living. In fact, he had ordered his friend and editor Max Brod to burn everything he wrote. Luckily for us, he didn't. Because Kafka was the real deal. For Kafka, a novel was 'an axe to break the frozen sea within,' not the next step in a media career, or the dilettantish result of a fortnight's typing. Whether he realised his own merit or not, Kafka had concluded early on that posterity was cruel, so why give it the chance to forget him? Fortunately, talent will out, and it did, though only with the help of a diligent literary executor. Crisis averted. Bennett's point was, we assume, that longevity is not our business. Posterity's point, if it had one, was: you don't get past me that easily.

The fact is, Posterity is often unfairly maligned as pitiless, though history tells us she (and it is a she for these purposes) has been pretty kind to just about every canonical writer going. Of course, they wouldn't be canonical otherwise, but the strange sifting that happens over the centuries comes to feel somehow just: merited, inalienable. Away from the raw and evolving present, the hastily lionized authors of every epoch have a habit of falling into obscurity, while those that only merited a footnote, or were completely invisible, are now taught on every syllabus, have statues erected in their memory, have their throwaway aperçus welcomed into the lexicon. A paradoxical phenomenon. And it is only right that this should be so. Extended metaphors aside, posterity isn't, after all, some mysterious, divine agency, but merely a consensus between readers over time. There is the fluctuation of language to take into consideration – the proto-English used by the Gawain poet, or the Early West Saxon of *Beowulf* is unintelligible, but that only proves language is mutable, not literature. If life is short and art long, then these two masterpieces prove that literature will squeak through, will endure like a cockroach after a nuclear holocaust. A consensus will eventually aggregate over time, forming a pantheon (usually consisting of dead white males, but let's leave that argument for the moment). This sifting, or natural selection, of the great from the mediocre, is a Darwinian process; imperceptible, but operational nonetheless. One thinks of the work silently ageing and maturing, like the effigies in Larkin's 'An Arundel Tomb'.

So, far from being cruel, posterity is revealed as being kind beyond the call of duty, though not ecumenically of course. The brute fact is this: there comes a moment in every unpublished writer's life when they face full-on the fear (or fact) that they may remain unpublished, or *under*-published, and thus unrecognised in their lifetime. They can only take chilly comfort in the possibility that posterity will publish their

work on their behalf – and only if she’s feeling particularly benevolent. Far from being a repugnant notion, as it was to the Kafka of Bennett’s play, posthumous fame is most likely a prominent daydream of many a struggling author. After all, it may be all they have to cling to as they once again break the scales in the local post office with their latest jiffy-bagged masterpiece. In that sense, posterity offers a loving embrace; albeit only to those who respect her in the morning. Write for the wrong motives, and your work will be pulped to fuel the eco-yurts of 2050. Hopefully.

Let’s look at the facts. History is littered with those who did create for the right motives but couldn’t get arrested. Poets, for some reason, come off particularly badly, but then their craft or art is the single form of writing guaranteed to lose a publisher money. Poor Keats only sold a handful of copies of *Poems*, *Endymion*, and *Lamia*, his three published works, in his short lifetime. Hopkins and Emily Dickinson sang in their chains without stirring the blood-drunk sleep of the literary lions of the day. And Wilfred Owen was blown to bits leaving only his unforgettable photograph and a few poems scattered throughout his correspondence. Novelists don’t get a much better deal, either: Austen, arguably the most popular author of 2010, scarcely made a mark on the literary Ordnance Survey map of her day, despite the Prince Regent being a fan. The hapless Melville gave up trying to get published after *Moby Dick*, dying a semi-anonymous customs inspector, only for the sublime *Billy Budd* to be discovered in a tin forty years later. And John Kennedy Toole tragically killed himself, leaving his mother to put *A Confederacy of Dunces* into print a decade after the literary arbiters of the day had closed the door in his face.

This roll-call may merely appear symptomatic of the vicissitudes of the times – but have a look at who *did* get the laurels. Take Robert Southey, for instance. Shelley was correct when he said poets were the unacknowledged legislators of the world, but not if you were Southey. Made Poet Laureate in 1813, after Walter Scott turned it down, Southey once entertained marmoreal fantasies about monuments to his poetic genius in St Paul’s cathedral. Now he is principally remembered for being the target of Byron’s gleeful scorn, and for telling Charlotte Bronte that literature was no career for a woman. After the commentators of the day had chosen to pour derision on Keats and his Cockney School ‘pretty pieces of paganism’, they elected Southey as poet Laureate. Bad call, maybe. Likewise Austen. By the mid nineteenth century, Frances Trollope (mother of Anthony) could have confidently assumed that her place in the pantheon of literary greats was assured, so successful were her blockbuster travel books and her social-problem novel, *Michael Armstrong, the Factory Boy*. Wherefore Michael Armstrong today, we may ask? The lone and level sands stretch far away over the bones of old Michael; the siroccos of time revealing novels with unfashionable binary abstract nouns for titles: *Sense and Sensibility*, *Pride and Prejudice*. Time and again, the lionised and loved of the moment – novelists, poets and commentators who, in their day, would have been hard to ignore – are magically forgotten; allowing us to lead happy lives, ignorant of their ever having walked the earth.

Of course, there are exceptions. Some canonical writers were big cheeses in their time. Aristophanes in the *Symposium* comes across as the slightly po-faced Richard Curtis of his day, albeit in a snug toga. Chaucer read to the court of Richard II, and not just in order to continue his annuity, if the posterity-obsessed *House of Fame* is anything to go by. Shakespeare, a wealthy man of the theatre, returned to

Stratford and bought the biggest house he could find. Pope, the first poet to make a fortune from published verse without a patron, was the first of many very public recluses. And Byron woke up one morning to find himself a rock star. But they were the lucky few. Some meteors are just too bright: the firmament forms a canon. *Dantechaucershakespearemiltonwordsworth*. Someone, if not everyone, took notice. Though in reality, even these writers began with small reputations that grew with time. Dramatists from Shakespeare to Sarah Kane underwent this incremental shift from the margins to centrality. Upstart crows became eagles. Their unknown contemporaries – the Websters, the Marvells, the Buchners - just had to be very lucky and very good.

Forward wind to the twenty-first century. Posterity, as kind as she is, will of course reveal our present-day literary scene to be a giant orgy of mediocrity, as it has every epoch down the centuries. Come Christmas, the Waterstone's tables will be a predictable landfill of misery memoirs, celebrity cookbooks, ghost-written auto-biogs, self-help, chick-lit, toilet-read miscellanies, lame literary fiction and genre garbage. And all by authors who will click off their Christmas tree lights on the twenty-fourth of December confident their names will appear from beneath ripped wrapping paper nationwide the following morning. This, apparently, is *enough*. But they have will have lost sight of the truly important goal: longevity. They will have taken their eyes off the prize no living writer ever gets to enjoy. Literary immortality. The creation of imperishable art. They will have traded the making of lasting work for temporal fame, riches and a full mini-bar on every date of their book tour. What if, fifty years hence, instead of Ian McEwan's elegant and macabre tales, we are reading someone completely below the radar at the present moment - even someone unpublished? That question must be quietly put aside by the Christmas-feted authors as they uncap another miniature and stare down from the high windows of a Denver hotel room.

But maybe it is all beyond their control anyhow. Saul Bellow once said attempted permanence was sad. Woody Allen, even pithier, said he would rather not live on through his work, but in his apartment. Perhaps both were admitting the same truth: try as one might to create things of lasting beauty, it is ultimately out of one's hands. To return to that unpublished writer breaking the scales in the post office, he or she can only fantasise about the warm, unknowable hug of future acclaim. At every turn they must contrast the icy rejection letters from the closed citadel of literary London (which, they hope, consists of a few super-connected flaneurs and micro-talents) with the big sloppy kiss of posthumous recognition. Not just the wink of the silver or black-spined Penguin Classic; or the wolf-whistle when the AQA exam board selects their title, but the night of debauchery heralded by their 200th birthday celebrations, the escorted tours around their home town, the blue plaque, the bronze cast made of their hard-drive. What dreams will come! In this respect, dame Posterity acts as a kind of 'super-agent', disseminating work on merit only – one notch above Andrew Wylie, one notch below God. Posterity is the literary agent who truly does 'only get involved if the writing is good enough'. All agents say this, and are taken to be reiterating a truth universally acknowledged. But a look at some of their lists makes one wonder: a couple of outstanding novelists, maybe, five or six middle-rankers, then vistas of genre hacks, acres of columnists, journeymen, media tarts, celebrity chefs, creative writing MAs yet to finish anything, *mates*. No wonder their lists are permanently 'full'. But to be aggrieved by this is to misunderstand the nature

of the beast. Agents are less concerned about imperishable art than many of their authors: they are, like everyone else in publishing, in it for what they can sell, for temporal fame and the loot. And this, somehow, is wrong. Andrew Wylie himself is on record as saying that if you're in publishing to make money then you're in the wrong industry; that many agents get into the business because they love *Madame Bovary* but end up in a room full of books they don't want to read. And he should know; an acute and sensitive comment to make, however. One also wonders whether posterity will continue to insert the legend 'Jackal' between his Christian name and surname. Let us hope she is feeling kind.

Armed with an idea of just how wrong present critical consensus can be, then, one's initial disdain for the hapless no-hopers and jiffy-bag fillers turns to sudden admiration. Scorn for maiden ladies in the Shires clogging slush piles with unreadable Aga-sagas, or rain-swept *ecrivailleurs* in Ipswich signing off on another illiterate covering letter turns to sudden compassion. These are all souls who have responded to life by writing about it. How noble! There is something fundamentally brave about putting words on paper; responding to the flux of experience by writing prose or poetry; by concocting characters through whom profound truths of human nature can be worked. Even if the endeavour is not judged successful, one feels these anonymous arbiters (agents) should commend the courage of the act. The sheer balls required. One imagines them in their glazed offices, ripping the cigar from their lips to exclaim: "To even think you could sit with the Big Boys and Girls, at the same table as Dickens, George Eliot, Dostoevsky, Joyce and Woolf! Wow! Here's the MS back with my standard rejection letter, but don't feel so bad: you tried, many don't! I just make a living from selling you on to an editor, a marketing team, a retailer, a body of critics, a public, and finally the merciless maw of posterity. But top marks for trying. Fare forward, fair traveller . . . and now fuck off."

And e-posterity won't help these brave souls either. The cyber-graveyard is already full. Paradoxically, electronic storage may equal less longevity: a writer's correspondence, if confined to email, may be lost for eternity. Type 'posterity' into Google and lo and behold a site called Posterity.com appears, offering you the chance to 'live forever; to create your own autobiography; a virtual you that will survive the whole of eternity.' You could always try writing a novel instead. The world-wide web will mean blogs, writings, *text* will endure like so much radioactive waste until someone pulls the plug, and then they will be gone for ever. The total democratisation offered by the web will hinder, not help posterity. Easy to get lost out there. Without any centralised control or literary filter, Posterity herself will get confused. The lunatics may have at last taken over the asylum after jimmying open the back door electronically; the punk ethos may have triumphed thirty years too late, but because of the brain-melting proliferation, the orgy of *access* offered by the internet, we may secretly long to return to the days of being advised what to like and buy by a critic. Wendy Cope joked that 'not only marble, but the plastic toys from cornflake packets' will outlive her verse. If cyberspace is to be the medium of the present century, she may not have been merely half-joking, like she undoubtedly was in her parody of Shakespeare.

Finally, one must look to the future. If the present is a tsunami of the execrable, at least there is comfort in the fact that the posterity's warm embrace will enfold the truly talented. The rest is not our business, and there is a sense that all

attempts at literature (to borrow from Petrarch) are Letters to Posterity. Kafka wouldn't understand, but then look at *his* author photograph – he certainly wasn't projecting forward to the time when that shifty stare would grace his biographical note. We cannot imagine Kafka much moved by the plight of the unpublished writer played by Paul Giamatti in the movie *Sideways*. In one of the bleakest and funniest scenes in modern cinema, the failed novelist character (Giamatti) has just been informed by his agent that the trail has finally gone cold. After upending a keg of wine over his own head, he sits on the beach with his buddy, suicidal, but resolves not to give up. At least Plath and Hemmingway waited to be published authors before they ended it all, he argues. At which point his buddy offers up the unhelpful example of John Kennedy Toole.

The Party Official

By Jude Cook

The day of the accident wasn't there. It was a blank, a blind-spot, a lacuna. Every time Flint tried to apprehend it he was thwarted by some unseen power. The event frustratingly escaped, like a mislaid bar of soap in a murky bath, or a dark stranger who follows but ducks behind a tree at every turn. Maddening. The only detail he could recall with any satisfaction was the driver who almost fatally crossed his path that Monday morning a month ago. A scowling Asian with a Bin Laden beard, cutting him up 'something rotten' in a delivery van as unseasonal sunshine whited out his windscreen. Then there was no windscreen, just a headlong hurtle into the hospital bed where he now resided, a bruised carcass of aches and incisions. It brought him satisfaction to hold this offender in his mind, because, as he told visitors on the day he first regained consciousness, this man was already a dead man.

'I'll have him, mum,' Flint croaked in a voice much smaller than he would have liked. 'If it's the last thing I do. Coming over here and taking our work, our women. I saw the name on the side of his greasy little truck.'

'Don't stress yourself, Roland,' soothed Flint's mother; Flint being the name his Party comrades had awarded him after the occasion he had used a quarry stone to virtually scalp a market trader on the Tredegar Road. 'One step at a time...What did it say?'

'Halal.'

'Well, that hardly narrows it down, does it? 'Ere, have some Lucozade - I brought the big bottle like you asked.'

The big one. He cherished the noble gold of the tall bottle as a talisman from childhood. It was one of his earliest memories - staring through the rain-bleak panes of his council flat bedroom at the playing field opposite, head full of flu, the large glass bottle of sticky, sugary drink on the woodchip dresser. To Flint it signified comfort, tradition, history; an unbroken line between his boyhood and now. A time when things weren't so mixed up. But most of all it meant mother: the cooling flannel applied to his forehead as she poured the fizzy frothing liquid into a glass; the slightly ripe waft of her dressing gown as she left to continue watching Good Morning Britain in the next room. He had asked for the big bottle and he had got it. And there it stood at his bedside with the cards and flowers.

'Pour me some, then.'

'All right, you lazy sod,' she snapped. 'Gis a chance.'

As his mother tilted the big bottle over the glass, Flint looked again at the get well card from Mitchell, the Party's Central London Organiser. It depicted a primitive man rising from the primordial swamp, through the stage of Neanderthal hunter finally to

present day *homo sapien*. The colours of the transformation were significant - from black sludge to gleaming white *Ubermensch*. Always caused Flint to chuckle when he saw it. This was how things *should* have progressed through history, he thought. Instead, the pollution of colour had somehow persisted - especially in the borough of Waltham Forest where the Party had its secret headquarters above a crumbling gym on the Blackhorse Road. Mitchell had guessed he would appreciate the card's sentiment and he wasn't wrong, oh no. In fact, Mitchell had been instrumental in fast-tracking Flint from the lowly position of Steward at Party rallies - a glorified thug, basically - to dreams of Deputy Party Chairman in a little under two years. For this he would be eternally grateful. After three years in a Seg Unit for violent affray, and no qualifications to his name, life had been hard on the outside, to say the least. But Mitchell had been his guiding light, his mentor. Flint had joined just as the Party had been cleaning up its act. The networks of false identities and clandestine meetings had been replaced by a more publicly acceptable face: swaggering councillors in Paul Smith suits, appealing to a nation scarred by terrorist outrages. Party members were told to avoid overtly racist language in public, to refer only to favouring 'indigenous ethnic groups' and 'voluntary initiatives to aid repatriation'. A system of administration based on a political party gearing up for Government had been installed. They had even appointed a National Treasurer - Costas White - though rumours that he was 'half-bubble' were said to be totally unfounded. And membership had mushroomed; many public figures were secret card-carriers, also company directors, entrepreneurs, bankers, estate agents, teachers, even people in the Arts. Among the new Party's many shiny, plausible-sounding policies was a call for capital punishment for paedophiles, terrorists and murderers - surprisingly popular with the most unexpected people, as Flint had discovered while doorstep canvassing. Day and night he would stand in nipping winds and rain, informing Chingford residents of the Party's strong anti-immigration stance and its hopes for Britain's re-unification with Ireland. He also scored big by reminding them the Party espoused that women should stay at home to nurture children while the men went out to protect and provide.

However, something of a glass ceiling had been reached by Flint in the days preceding his accident. The press had recently sent a mole undercover to expose the number of party members with criminal records, a high proportion as it turned out. Even though disavowals were issued to the media containing the startling fact that twenty per cent of the nation's workforce also had criminal records, the damage was done. Mitchell had taken him aside one night as fists smacked into the pendulous punch-bags below. The Party couldn't countenance a Deputy Party Chairman who had done three years inside for GBH. He would have to settle for the lesser title of Head of Security Training, a position for which his brief spell in the forces recommended him. Secretly, Flint was well chuffed. Though he and Mitchell went out to sink eight consolatory pints at the Rose and Crown followed by a guilty kebab, he didn't much care that his Party Chairman dreams had crashed and burned. He was the HST. Just the job title made him walk a little taller, as if he had been accepted, after long petition, into the SAS.

'I'll be going now.' Flint's mother was standing over him.

‘Okay...They don't do the old wrapper no more.’

‘On the bottle? Nah - that's progress for ya.’ She smiled, her eyes misty and sentimental though thick lenses. ‘You got a visitor now, anyway.’

‘Oh, mum,’ groaned Flint. He attempted to turn but was brought short by an alarming pain in his chest akin to a screwdriver inserted into the socket of his heart. *‘Jesus!’*

‘Just lie still... He’s the bloke you asked for. The blood donor.’ Flint brightened, something close to tears smarting in his vision.

‘That's all right. Send him in.’ He shifted his left cheek agonisingly and his mother bent forward to kiss it. ‘Bye, mum. Wrap up warm.’

Flint was alone for less than sixty seconds before his visitor entered the cubicle. In this time, his mind went back to its habitual task: ransacking the interior room for clues to the accident. What had he been planning for the Security Training meeting that evening? Where was the location? What had he had for breakfast? Mitchell had told him not to worry, even though thirty Party members had gathered in secret behind Ilford mosque to wait for a Head of Security Training who never appeared. It was unprofessional, that's what irked him the most. If it had been the SAS, the enemy would have been torturing his men by now, maybe with power-drills and testicular clamps...

‘Hello, Sir. I am Momo.’

Flint's first thought on seeing the beaming, mahogany face above his bed was that there must have been some kind of terrible mistake. A mix-up. He imagined a hospital orderly had been sent early to empty his bedpan when he had nothing to show for a morning's constipated straining. A black man stood there, grinning in that unstoppable way he had always found so namelessly irksome.

‘Who are you?’ asked Flint, flinching visibly at the sight of his guest, as if excrement really had been passed under his nostrils.

‘I am the man who provided your blood,’ he announced triumphantly, a hand darting out from the cuffs of khaki cotton sleeves. ‘Oh - I am so sorry, you have restricted movement. Anyway. How are you?’

Flint assessed Momo’s artlessly smiling face - a spontaneous grin that halved his features; a daily beauty to himself, no doubt, before the shaving mirror. In the absence of any phrase more appropriate, he made a sarcastic grunt. ‘Fine.’

‘Well - you are far from fine, my friend. But you are alive! That is the main thing. Mind if I sit?’

A carousel of desperate thoughts span around the convalescent’s head as Momo sat down on the orange plastic chair his mother had just vacated. It couldn't be! Surely

not - there were rules weren't there? - under what circumstances? - if only he had known! A disaster! And then the nausea, the raw instinctive heave at the thought that this man's blood - gallons of it - was doing business in his body, providing the organs with oxygen and things he hardly understood. He felt like slitting his wrists there and then. Finally, a kind of remorse or irony set in, an inward ache. Of all the people in all the world who could have -

'I think you've got the wrong room, mate.'

'No, they send me here at your request. Donations are usually anonymous, but such a large transfusion from a blood bank is traceable at the patient's request.' Momo paused and breathed in deeply, as if inhaling half the air in the room.

'Chrysanthemums! My favourite!'

'But... But you're...'

'Yes. I am here. Tell me about the accident. You look in a bad way.'

A blurred image of the delivery truck, the snowscape windscreen, briefly sidetracked him. 'You're ...'

'Yes?'

'A spear-chucker.'

Momo paused and looked deeply into Flint's eyes, into his soul and back out again at the white hospital wall behind. An atavistic threat, just momentarily, passed between them. They were two men, two hunters from different tribes, passing in the veldt; warily, only just recognising each other as human. Then he laughed. He tilted his head back and let free a peal of furious, joyous laughter that lasted for almost thirty seconds. When at last Momo had wiped the tears from his nose, eyes and ears, he leant into Flint's immobile body.

'I get it now... Oh, dear me! You don't like the fact that I am a black man, yes?'

After the longest pause, Flint managed a clotted word. 'Yes.'

Momo chuckled again, clutching his sides, which appeared almost as painful to him as Flint's. 'Without me you would be a dead man. You have a rare blood type, my friend, very rare.'

'I know that,' muttered Flint, looking at his visitor with more hatred than he had ever felt for anyone in his life. 'And I'm not your friend.'

'Oh, you think not? It was lucky they found a match. Your blood type lacks the Duffy antigen.'

'Speak English.'

‘Put simply, they often go by what blood *lacks* when they look for a match. Nearly all African people are Duffy Negative - which is good because it means we have a resistance to certain types of malaria. But nearly all Caucasians are Duffy Positive ... Except rare cases such as yourself. That's why I was chosen.’

A settled hush now filled the room. Momo paused and picked up Mitchell's card, an impish smile again threatening to open the Mahogany creases of his face.
‘Put it down.’

‘Oh, that's very funny. You find that funny?’

‘No.’

‘I do. It shows you British still have a sense of humour. We used to be a democracy, too, once upon a time.’

Silence. Flint now laid his head back on his pillow, mournfully. In an attempt to blot the sound of his own heartbeat pumping at his temples he surprised himself by asking a question. After all, what else did people say in such hopeless social situations?

‘Where you from then?’

‘Ethiopia. Addis Ababa. Actually, I am from the North originally, but I have to move there. You want to know why?’

‘Not really.’

‘Deforestation.’

Flint pondered this, troubled by vague memories of the Live Aid concert from two decades ago. Then his brow creased, causing his stitches to sting.

‘I thought you lot was all starving in the desert. All big bellies - your kids asking for handouts.’

Momo laughed and drew his sleeve across his forehead, which had started to show globes of sweat. ‘No, in the North you have Afromontane. Forests. We are very poor country and they chop trees down to grow crops: coffee beans, pulses, cereals, grazing for cattle too. Now they deforest even more because of climate change - most of it caused by you big polluters.’

‘Oi - without us mate, you'd be - you'd still be ...’

‘Crawling from the ooze of civilisation, I know. Let me tell you two things, my friend.’ And here Momo's eyes darkened like they had before, filling the sockets until the whites seemed to disappear. ‘I only come here because I have to. First I flee

mountains to the City and make a life there. Then there was police massacre after elections two years ago. I forced to flee again and leave my wife behind. And now I come to this country where there are people like you who cannot accept how the world is.'

Flint began to feel the will to resist receding. He had even begun to admire his donor slightly. He had always liked strong, pugnacious characters - his father had been one. The few dim memories he possessed always featured his old man telling him how lucky he was. And now Momo was about to do the same.

'Secondly, you don't know how lucky you are. For finding my blood and for finding a doctor to give it to you. In Ethiopia there is one doctor for every hundred thousand people.' The laugh returned, big and broad. 'Where are *you* from?'

'Walthamstow.'

'London, yeah?'

'But it's more like a district of London - a village.' Flint liked the idea of this - it gave him hope; a spurious dream of continuity; a village church with a couple of pubs and a green where the men came to talk and smoke and play bowls on a midsummer evening. Whites only, of course.

'Well, I come from a village too. You see, we are really both from different ends of the same village. The global village.'

Flint looked up at Momo's face and thought it looked very ancient, with pale light behind it from a strained London afternoon. The man was smiling. It was almost too much to take - like another sun. Flint glanced back at the table and saw the Lucozade bottle and thought, absurdly, about offering him some. Instead he looked right past him, at the window of his cubicle. He saw that a rain had started, dotting the panes.

'Thanks, mate.'

'My pleasure,' said Momo, sitting back finally.

Biography

Jude Cook lives in London and studied English Literature at UCL, where he graduated with a first. Originally a musician and songwriter, his band Flamingos released two albums twelve-years apart: *Plastic Jewels* (1995) and *Street Noise Invades the House* (2007). An extract from his first novel, *Byron Easy*, won the Writers' and Artists' Yearbook Competition in 2007, judged by The Literary Consultancy. His essays and short fiction have appeared in *Staple* magazine.

