



# Paul Torday

## – far from formulaic

Zoë Fairbairns meets the bestselling author who has resisted the temptation to use his successful first novel as a template

I'm hesitant about using the t-word. The epithets of class war should have no place in a good-natured publication like *newbooks*. But what other word is there for these top-drawer, high-net-worth swells who saunter through the pages of Paul Torday's novels, dripping money? They spend £3,000 on a single bottle of wine, and pay off their ne'er-do-well son's gambling debts by selling a farm or two. They own multiple homes, they employ housekeepers, butlers and ghillies, they use the term 'everyone' to mean their own particular circle of friends, and they bristle if you ask them what they do: 'I don't do anything... I manage my affairs.' The women withdraw after dinner, and allow themselves to be told by their husbands whether they may or may not bring their mobile phones on holiday; the men join gentlemen's clubs in order to get away from their wives, and to find a 'refuge for prejudices of every sort that could not be aired in public'.

'These people ought not to be dismissed as quote-unquote-toffs,' says Paul Torday, employing the word himself before I have had a chance to decide whether to use it or not. 'They are a valid part of our world.' Of course they are. I wouldn't dream of dismissing toffs.

### Hooves

We meet on a chilly afternoon in a hotel in St James Place in the gentlemen's-club area of London. (He's staying nearby at his own club; he lives on a farm near Newcastle upon Tyne.) Arriving a few minutes early, I check out the small drawing room that his publishers have booked for us – the polished mahogany table, the antique fireplace, not in use but filled with glass spheres. On the wall are framed nineteenth-century prints: views of the Bosphorus, and a man in a hunting jacket riding a horse ('Mr Will Long on Bertha'). I wouldn't be surprised if there were some £3,000 bottles of wine stashed away in the cellars beneath my feet, and I wonder what I am supposed to do if Paul Torday tries to order one.

He's of medium height with greying brown hair and intense blue eyes. He wears a dark grey suit over a pin-striped shirt with a dark blue tie and

silver cufflinks. Hanging round his neck is an odd contraption, a metal circle on a thong. A bugging device? A mine detector? Something for taking stones out of horses' hooves? I'll slip it into the conversation later. In the meantime I ask him if he would like anything to, er, drink? Tea would be lovely, he says.

He's in his early 60s, which is quite old for a new novelist (his first novel came out in 2007). In his youth he studied English literature at Pembroke College Oxford, not because he wanted to study literature particularly but because his school (the Royal Grammar School in Newcastle upon Tyne) thought that gave him a better chance of getting into Oxford or Cambridge. 'I probably would have preferred history or law. But English was reckoned to be my strong suit, so that was what happened.' He toyed with the idea of writing, but 'I didn't feel convinced enough that I would be any good at it. And I didn't have the commitment.' Two early novels ended up in a drawer.

### Light bulb

After Oxford, he took a management course at the University of Manchester Institute of Science and Technology, then went into the family engineering business. Contrary to some reports, he is not an engineer himself – 'I can't even change a light bulb without help' – but a manager of engineers. 'Engineers tend to get very over-focused on particular projects. And sometimes you need someone who is not a specialist to say, "well, does that make sense?"' 'Are we going to make money from this?'" He likes working with engineers. 'Most of them have been absolute, you know, gold. Really good people. Structured people.'

He has spent a lot of his working life in meetings, some of them more interesting than others: 'I was involved with an environmental charity which meant I was having lots of meetings with people like the Environment Agency about fishing and fish and river water quality. They were very interesting mostly, but sometimes they were grindingly long and tedious. And as a safety valve I started to write this joke about a project for fish,

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but set in the Middle East, a landscape that was as alien as I could think of.' This fishy doodling, combined with earlier engineering projects that involved supplying oil-drilling equipment to Middle Eastern oil producers, led to his first published novel.

### Al Qaeda

*Salmon Fishing in the Yemen* (Phoenix, 2007) tells the story of Dr Alfred Jones, a buttoned-up, over-focused British fisheries scientist who works in the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. He has a chilly economist wife, a scholarly interest in the caddis fly, and an unwanted project which has just been dumped on his desk by his boss: to create a salmon fishing river in the highlands of the Yemen at the behest of a wealthy oil sheikh.

To Jones, the project is absurd: the weather in the Yemen is wrong, the water is wrong, the engineering unfeasible. Not only will the project not work, but it will alienate everyone, from British fishing enthusiasts to the RSPCA to Al Qaeda – not to mention the salmon themselves, whose aeons-old migratory instincts are not to be trifled with. But Jones is being leant on by the sheikh who, having purchased a Scottish estate as one of his many homes, is out-toffing the native-born toffs, offering pots of money, along with charm, flattery and seductive hospitality, to those who do his bidding. Other pressures come from a foppish and manipulative Downing Street spin doctor, and a talented and beautiful estate agent called Harriet Chetwode-Talbot who becomes Jones's boss and looks as if she might become more.

### Documents

The story is ingeniously presented in documents: business letters, Hansard, emails, interview transcripts, office memoranda, and personal letters which, en route between service personnel and their loved ones, have been infuriatingly hacked about by army censors. What attracted Torday to this approach?

'I think it was sheer cowardice,' he says, in the same self-deprecating tone he used earlier to tell me that he could not change a light bulb. 'I didn't feel brave enough to write in conventional novel form. Having tried it twice I had actually lost my confidence. I didn't think I was getting anywhere. So I thought, why don't I do it in the form of all these papers for meetings that I am seeing all the time? Emails and technical papers. And that was what kicked it off. And once I'd started it in that format, I more or less dug myself into a trap and had to go on. And although it worked in the sense that the book got published, it's not something I'd ever do again.

'I rather like the idea of epistolary novels,' he continues. 'I enjoyed reading *Clarissa* when I was a lad at university. But writing in that format is

terribly constraining because you want to step out of the voice of the person writing the email, to try and describe the scenery for instance. And it's incredibly difficult, because people don't do that in emails or diaries very often. So it becomes quite artificial. I think I probably got away with it, but it was a bit of a nightmare.'

A nightmare for the writer maybe: but for the reader of *Salmon Fishing in the Yemen*, it's hugely entertaining to be on the lookout for political machinations, personal affections and hostilities beneath the cool formality of business language, and to share (via emails intercepted by the security services) the bemusement of Al Qaeda when the man they dispatch to Scotland to assassinate the sheikh, fails to fool the locals with his disguise because he is wearing the wrong tartan. And when Alfred Jones' hitherto-unemotional wife Mary starts to suspect that she may be about to lose her husband to another woman, and tersely emails 'Fred. Please come back to me. Mary', those seven words, jostling against the twin constraints of email and her own built-in reluctance to let her feelings show, are surprisingly moving. 'It was fun,' Torday acknowledges. 'Parts of it were great fun, like mimicking Hansard. But it had its drawbacks.'

### Inheritance

'Fun' is not a word that could be applied to Torday's second novel, *The Irresistible Inheritance of Wilberforce* (Phoenix 2008), which is the story of an obscure, socially-inept software engineer drinking himself to death while convincing himself that his life is as full of choices as his cellar is full of fine wines. 'Because I am nobody,' he reflects, having overheard one of his toff customers describe him as such, 'I can choose to be whom I like. I can choose my life to be what I want it to be. I can become anybody; I can do anything.' In the meantime, he drinks 4-5 bottles of wine a day. It's the most tragic yet irresistibly readable portrait of a sufferer from alcoholic poisoning (I nearly wrote 'boozier' but that made it sound too jolly), since Patrick Hamilton created George Harvey Bone in his 1941 classic *Hangover Square*.

A Patrick Hamilton fan himself, Torday is pleased with the comparison. 'Of all my books, *The Irresistible Inheritance of Wilberforce* is the one that gave me the most satisfaction to write. Because having finished *Salmon Fishing in the Yemen*, I knew that everyone would expect me – if I was going to write another book at all – to write another satire, comedy, you know? And I was absolutely determined not to go down that road, although if you can become formulaic and do it well, it's actually the right way to go in terms of making lots of money. But because I had got so interested in writing, I wanted to see what other genres I could do, and just try different forms and ways of telling stories.' He tells this one backwards: the story begins in 2006 and ends in





Paul Torday © Gareth Easton/Writer Pictures

2002, hauntingly replicating the disorientation of the drinker who isn't sure what day it is, let alone what year.

### ***The Girl on the Landing***

Unreliable narrators are Paul Torday's forte. They demand the involvement of the reader who, simply by believing or not believing a flawed account of what is going on, becomes implicated in it. And narrators don't get much less reliable than Michael Gascoigne, who, along with his wife Elizabeth, narrates his latest book *The Girl on the Landing*, which is published in paperback in September by Phoenix.

Elizabeth married Michael for security – he's another of Torday's toffs, with a large flat in a fashionable area of London, and an income-generating estate in Scotland. But now she discovers – in an intriguing reversal of the plight of Mr Rochester in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, who was only allowed to know that Bertha Mason was mad after he had married her – that Michael's reassuring quietness and

steadiness – 'like a calm river at night' – are pharmaceutically-induced. He is mentally ill – he sees people who aren't there, hears voices, and may be a murderer. He is doped up to the eyeballs by his psychiatrist (Elizabeth didn't even know that he had a psychiatrist) with Serendipozan, a mind-numbing, behaviour-modifying drug which he has decided to stop taking.

At least Mr Rochester had the attic to lock Bertha in. Elizabeth doesn't want to lock Michael anywhere: he may be madder and more dangerous when he stops taking his Serendipozan, but he is also more loving, sexier.

So which is the real Michael, and what should be done about the sick one? Can evil be cured with a pill? Serendipozan is a fictional substance, but the dilemma exists. 'People have been damaged by too much of the wrong kind of medication,' says Torday. 'The intention is absolutely right, which is to cure people. That's what drug companies try to do, and they are constantly coming up with miraculous drugs,

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and they work – to prolong life or make people sane again. But nevertheless, the drug companies are always accountable to their shareholders. So there is this driver to get people to consume more drugs. And I find that quite sinister.'

### Spin bowler

Equally sinister, in some people's view, is what's happening at the gentlemen's club Michael belongs to, Groucher's: there's a proposal to admit to membership, for the first time in the club's history, a man of Ugandan Asian origin – a 'Sooty', as one of the members refers to him. Those of a more liberal frame of mind point out in Mr Patel's favour that he is 'by far the best spin bowler in our part of Hertfordshire.' The row threatens to rend Groucher's asunder.

The name 'Groucher's' is not intended as a reference to any similar-sounding existing club; Torday chose the name because it sounded grumpy. 'It's about grumpy men.' His tone is deadpan: you never quite know whether he is approving of these people, disapproving, or having fun at their expense as they dutifully intone that some of their best friends are 'coloured' and their main concern is that Mr Patel might feel 'awkward' as a member of an otherwise all-white club. 'It's affectionate fun-poking,' Torday says. 'It's not meant to be biting satire at all. The way I like to write is to try and bring humour into it. To form a contrast to what would otherwise be rather bleak subjects. So I poke fun at these things... It's probably quite obvious from what I've been saying that I regard myself as part of that world. But that doesn't mean I can't see the funny side, or that I can't see some of the absurdities that come about there.'

The nature of Britishness and Englishness are debated furiously in *The Girl on the Landing* – and irrelevantly, in the view of Michael as, having refused any longer to take the medication which 're-engineers your brain chemistry', he raves about gene pools and plummets towards breakdown. If identity and personality are so fragile, how can anyone be said to be 'truly' British, 'truly' anything? It's disturbing stuff, but compulsively readable, which is what Torday wants: 'My perfect reader is someone who picks the book up and goes on reading it until it's late at night.'

### Relax

He is not himself an enthusiastic reader of contemporary fiction. He mentions books that he has enjoyed by writers such as Marina Lewycka, Ian McEwan and Ali Smith, but his preferences lie with the classics – Dickens, Trollope, Waugh. 'If I want to relax I want

to read books from another era. Because the English comic novel and its structure is something I absolutely love. I've failed to find many examples of it in contemporary fiction.' He doesn't want to appear dismissive of contemporary literature, and he acknowledges that if everyone felt as he did, few new books would be bought or read, but 'when I am writing, which is quite a lot of the time, I find it distracting to read other people's work.'

His current project is a spin-off from *The Girl on the Landing* – a minor character called Charlie Summers who sells Japanese pet food has taken on a life of his own and is shortly to have his own book. 'I regard myself as a very non-literary writer. I think of myself as someone who might very easily have belonged to a book group, who has started writing simply in order to tell stories, because I enjoyed being told stories when I was at the age when people told you stories.' He sees book groups as 'a growing movement that seems to be becoming more and more powerful. It's as if it's taking the voice of authority away from the critic. Democratising it. I think that is probably a very healthy thing.' Book groups, he says, 'have the temerity to have their own opinions, rather than received opinions... People go on and on about how we're not living in a literate age any more, but the evidence in front of my eyes is that we are more, not less, literate. And reading more, and thinking about what we're reading more.'

### Shoelace

'Coming to writing late in life has been a terrific boon,' he says. 'Because I suspect if I hadn't done that, I would have gone on just doing what I've been doing for the last 30 years, and doing it more and more mechanically and with less and less enjoyment, and probably being less good at it. Whereas because I've made this sort of change – and I still do business type things a bit, but a lot of my life now is around my writing – it has been almost rejuvenating. I've found it enormously invigorating.'

Invigorated or not, he's still got the problem shared by many of us of advancing years which is what to do with our glasses when we're not actually wearing them. This, I discover as we say our farewells, is the function of the ring on the string round his neck: it's for hanging his specs on. 'It's made from a shoelace and an old key ring,' he explains. 'Some of the engineering has rubbed off on me after all.' So the non-changer of light bulbs is nevertheless an inventor? 'No,' he admits. 'My wife invented it. She got so bored with me losing my spectacles.' And he goes back to his club. ■



***The Girl on the Landing*** by Paul Torday is one of this issue's featured books and you can sample it on the facing page.

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This book is published 3 September.