

# TLC Showcase

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JANE AITKEN

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## Introduction to *The Great House*

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I am shamefully rather enjoying the controversy over Sir John Chilcot's Report into the Iraq War because it is putting many of the issues covered in my novel back under the spotlight. When I started writing, I could never have imagined that my book would be finished before his report was published. Whether it is delayed because he is bowing to pressure from those with things to hide and reputations to tarnish, or because he does not want to publish anything less than the full story, I do not know (although I hope the latter). But having watched and read much of the evidence while researching the book, I do know he has at least a large part of the unedifying story and some fascinating testimonies.

But I'm digressing before I've started, because it was a previous Iraq related Inquiry – the Hutton Inquiry – which inspired my book. I will never forget standing in front of the mirror in the bathroom and hearing on the radio that Dr David Kelly had been found dead. That drama and my intense anger over the 2003 Iraq invasion, sowed the seeds of *The Great House*.

And yet the book is not actually set against the Iraq conflict – I didn't want to be over constrained by facts – but is set against a much more malleable fictional foreign policy crisis set in the Middle East. But the fundamental themes are similar. Initially, I wanted to write it from the point of view of a Prime Minister, a sort of modern Trollopian moral tale, but I wasn't sure if I could grasp the layers of narcissism required and make a character anyone would want to read about. And anyway, I needed an anti-hero who was much more attainable, much closer to us. I chose a senior foreign policy aide – a career diplomat – one of the many enablers around power. Not a terribly good person for sure (although he gets better), but probably not dissimilar to many who value ambition too highly. After working in the Foreign Office for a few years, I had seen quite a few in the mould. I have been asked why I didn't choose a woman protagonist and, while I cannot say that no woman would have behaved as my protagonist did, a man more ably displayed the deleterious machismo which still peppers high flying workplaces.

The story of how much integrity gets jettisoned in the quest for power and ambition is hardly new, from Macbeth to Faust and much else before and after and in between, but it certainly seems an apt one at this moment when politicians and civil servants'

decision to go along with the Iraq war under a powerful Prime Minister's influence, and bankers' decisions over debt and risk before 2008 are still shaping our world : in the Middle East – with all its awful ramifications – and in our economic woes.

In honestly writing about the ideas behind the book, I've gone against the advice I've been given that everyone is turned off by political messages in novels – especially agents... Oh dear – too late now. But certainly I agree that no book works without real characters and story and that is what took over after I started writing. The story is set in Washington, New York (where I was living at the time), Gaza and London, and involves a disastrous rescue attempt of British hostages in Gaza, and – yes – a public inquiry. It is primarily the story of the protagonist's guilt and breakdown in the aftermath of the disaster, as the truth is unravelled.

It was a revelation when TLC reader, Tom Bromley, liked my manuscript and thought it had commercial potential. He made some good suggestions, many of which I already knew were right, but I needed to be told by someone else. He also touched on the vexed issue of genre – it didn't easily fit in one – and encouraged me to promote it as a literary thriller. And TLC has been valiantly helping me look for an agent who sees that this is the right moment for this book.

And, in case I never get another platform... come on Sir John (and I'm sure he avidly reads the TLC newsletter), take the time you need for your report but, for the sake of the hundreds of thousands dead and those still dying in the region, make damn sure it's full and honest.

## The Great House, by Jane Aitken

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It feels bloody strange going through the door at Number Ten again into the hallway. The fireplace and his favorite hooded Porter's chair. Nothing like as grand as the Great House of course – but still distinctive, almost hallowed. It's been less than four months since Robert practically lived here, but he doesn't belong any more. Ex-colleagues say big *hellos* but after a few fidgety moments excuse themselves to get on with their frenetic activity. The most powerful house in Britain – well maybe – but it seems vaguely ridiculous now that his universe is elsewhere. It is cramped compared to the grandeur of the Great House. But he still feels anxious and almost light-headed as he turns right to the press offices to find Curtis.

As always the televisions are blaring, but pictures of the casualties in the latest Israeli air raid into Gaza, or roadside bomb in Iraq go unnoticed. Robert knows the only time anyone looks up at the screens is when the PM, a close colleague, or opposition leader is on – then everyone stops and a brief hush falls. He never thought of it before, when he was *here*, but now he wants to tell them that they should actually *look* at some of the pictures beamed from the world's trouble spots. Seeing is believing, after all. They think they know, but they do not.

Mark is in his office jabbing away furiously at his keyboard. He hardly looks up when Robert enters, but immediately tosses him a photocopied sheet.

'Seen that? Self-satisfied bastard.'

Robert sees that it's an article from The Guardian by William under the heading: 'Ex UN Ambassador Questions Jebaliya Decisions'. As Curtis shows no sign of stopping his punishment of the keyboard, Robert sits down and reads the Article. It is a softly worded, but brutally effective annihilation of the Prime Minister's handling of Jebaliya. Its basis is the Prime Minister's willingness to blow apart a peace process with serious hopes of success, on the basis of flimsy intelligence. It is perfectly written and never sensationalist. He couldn't have written it better himself. This is deeply unlike William – to court attention like this. He knows this decision will not have been taken lightly. Saying it in a public inquiry and writing it in a national newspaper are two very different things for William. Curtis does not understand this. He silently hands it back.

Curtis still hasn't looked at Robert: "Well, I hope he and the UN will be very happy together. But, it's general on the intelligence stuff, because he hasn't a clue, and it says pretty much what he said to the Inquiry this morning. It's nothing to worry about, although the PM will be livid.' Finally Curtis looks up from his screen. 'Jesus Robert – you look bloody awful. What's up? Not worrying about tomorrow are you? It'll be a piece of piss, you'll see. The Inquiry members are even worse than we expected – numpties, the lot of them.'

'Well I'm certainly not looking forward to it – what do you think?'

'Oh come on – I'm going to take you through it question by question. And there's nothing they can ask you that I haven't thought off. I hope you know that. My guess is you can keep them happy talking about your Erez shooting incident for five hours. And it'll all be over tomorrow and you can gallop back to your castle.'

Robert sits motionless. Maybe Curtis is right. He can just follow the brief – and he does indeed know there will be no question Curtis hasn't foreseen – and he'll be on his way home. Please God, let it be that simple.

'PM wants a quick word before we get started. Just to say bottoms-up, sort of thing.'

Fuck. Robert had predicted this. He doesn't want to see the PM or get the full treatment. Curtis goes back to his typing and Robert just sits there not knowing what he's waiting for. Finally Curtis' phone rings.

'Yep, we're coming.' He jumps up immediately and gives Robert a nod. 'OK he's finishing his phone call: you're on.'

Whether the PM had finished his phone-call or not, when they go into his office at the back of the building, he is on his mobile standing looking out of the window to the Garden. The office is even smaller than Robert remembers. Curtis goes straight and perches himself in his usual spot on the arm of the sofa and starts looking at his phone. Robert sits on the chair next to him and listens to the Prime Minister who is obviously trying to finish up the conversation.

'..... you have to decide if you're with me on this Mike. Because I know what I'm doing: I really do. It's a question of trust.'

A pause while his caller speaks, and the PM is now looking at Curtis and rolling his

eyes. 'Well I need to go now, but I appreciate your concerns. You can always discuss it more with Mark. Yes, yes. Bye now.'

'Oh thanks for fobbing him off on me.' Curtis has now snapped his phone shut and is all eyes and ears. The PM walks towards Robert, hand outstretched.

'Ah Robert. Apologies for keeping you waiting. It's great to see you. How are you enjoying that mansion of yours over there?' He doesn't wait for an answer. There is a restlessness about the Prime Minister which, either Robert has forgotten, or, that's got worse. He now sits down – leaning back in the sofa, but he's not relaxing.

'Robert, I wanted a chance to thank you for appearing for us tomorrow. You know that Mark will go over all the details with you and he's prepared the ground perfectly, as usual. But on the broad brush, the most important thing for you to remember is the overall context. I wanted to try to remind you of that – of the circumstances at the time. We acted in good faith in the interest of protecting British subjects – on the information we had available. Of course, the outcome wasn't what we wanted which is extremely sad, and no-one could be sadder than I was about losing colleagues. But we did not have the benefit of hindsight then – so easy to forget. The important thing is that I am at peace with the decisions we took. And so should you be. You really should. As long as you stick within that mindset, there's nothing that can go wrong. Just remember, it was a terrible, terrible tragedy, but that's all it was. We need to move on now, to the crucially important things for Britain that we've got on our horizon, and stop looking back. That's the most important thing'

The Prime Minister's posture looks relaxed, but if you look closely he still has the slight twitching of muscles, emblematic of months without enough sleep, and time zone confusions from manic globe-trotting. Robert is awed by his unflinching certainty. He wants to know if he is really that certain all the way to the core: if you sliced him across would 'DOUBT' be written in tiny, tiny red letters right the way through like a stick of Brighton rock? Or is the Prime Minister that dangerous lunatic, the fundamentalist, who really believes his own rhetoric – that he is right, and everyone else is wrong?

But Robert finds himself a little bit less awed than in the past and hears himself say: 'but don't you think it can be argued by the Inquiry, Prime Minister, that we based too much on a single piece of intelligence which could never be more than indicative.'

This is pretty much the first word of doubt he has uttered to the PM on the subject, and he hears Curtis shift anxiously on his perch.

'No, frankly Robert, I don't feel that. I absolutely don't, and nor should you. My burden of care for those Parliamentarians was absolute. And it's totally right that it should have been. And honestly, I need to focus on all the challenges we have now like public service reform, improving Britain's economic prospects – all the things that matter to people now. That's why it's so vital we close this thing down, and why I'm so happy I have you to represent us at the Inquiry.'

Mark has his chin in his hand: 'we're going to prep all that stuff now anyway.'

The PM has lost focus now and Robert sees the meeting is over. He's had the full treatment – undivided attention for five minutes – and now the PM is onto other things. In fact, he realises that this meeting is really quite strange – he is being treated like an outsider, sold the party line almost. Normally the grand objectives are not trotted out for civil servants; but this is not for Robert's benefit, it's so he can absorb the sentiment and confidence into all his pores and regurgitate it to the Inquiry, second hand. Mark will do the nuts and bolts but the PM is breathing the meaning into it – the silk ribbon on the parcel. Already on his way out, Mark is rapping his fingers on the door while he waits for Robert. He has the corner of his mobile phone in the side of his mouth.

## About the Writer

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I suppose I have three main strings to my bonnet.

The first is that I love books – I can't say I was an early reader as a child, or indeed that I am a quick reader – but from early adulthood I have found nothing more absorbing and satisfying than a great novel where the characters stick around my head for years after; or that includes immaculate descriptions which heighten my own experience of the world; or is full of perfect, economical sentences packed with layers of meaning. I have always known I would try to write novels at one time – although I left it later than I expected.



My second string is that I am avidly interested in politics and world events. I worked in the civil service for sixteen years – most of those years based with the Froeign Office in Brussels. That time included the period before the Iraq war which influenced *The Great House*. I've lived in a number of different countries and learning how they work and relate to the world is always fascinating – particularly in the USA during our four years in New York where I wrote *The Great House*. My husband was working with the United Nations on Middle East issues – which became something of an obsession for us both.

My last string, although more apron than bonnet, is that I'm passionate about food and cooking. I was always interested in food (never that infuriating thing in a child – the picky eater) and learnt cooking with my mother – she was endlessly patient and instructive. I have only latterly realised, that letting me cook family dinner parties must have created more work for her and I imagine the results were mixed – but she always agreed my menus and bought the exotic ingredients required. My current cullinary obsession is the extraordinary tranformative properties of eggs – how they can change before your eyes into silky custard or mayonaise, or create the perfect scaffolding for a light sponge, or curdel into the humble but delicious scrambled egg (a touch of salt and maybe a few chopped chives, and thin slices of brown toast). And all in their own airtight container – quite magical.



And then there's all the rest. My family – and in particular my twelve-year-old son – and walking the dog. My wonderful friends who, sadly, are scattered across the globe. We have just moved to Switzerland, and my mission (as well as writing another book) is to discover how this small, land-locked, country with scant resources (sensational mountains notwithstanding) has managed to be so, so wealthy...