

TLC Showcase

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Introduction to Miss Perfect

Miss Perfect is set in the north of England in the space between the Falklands War and the miners' strike when I was a social worker in a staunchly Labour local authority. In this extract Madge Perfect and her staff member Lorraine are going out to what social workers try to do: right wrongs.

The idea behind the central character, Madge Perfect, grew from my memories of a middle-aged manager. Unlike the suits at County Hall she was totally devoted to caring for people of all ages and needs. Promotion was out of the question, sexism and ageism the norm. The whiff of corruption benefitted men not women. The times were changing as new-fangled management ideas and cutbacks closed services. 'Young people nowadays' were an increasing irritation.

In resolving to write a fictional portrait of just such a woman I wanted to explore two questions: was love possible, might she find life beyond work? I needed to unpick the reasons behind her present state, how she reached this point where work had become her life. Part of my answer came in the back story I weaved around her after delving into a skeleton in my family history cupboard and extracting the experience of an ancestor who suffered an abusive childhood. These dark undertones in shades of grey are not gratuitous; they are there to help explain her present situation. They also point up the occasional overlaps in the life experiences of clients and carers.

Rather than leave her marooned in this present I introduced Professor Mitchell, an oddball sociology professor at the nearby university. The bosses at HQ have hired him to investigate the efficiency of service delivery in Madge's district. These men want rid of her as does Dan her ambitious young deputy. Mitchell is kindly and means well but lacks sensitivity. His sermonising on the feminist insights of Susie Orbach does nothing to ease Madge's concerns about her weight. But he persists and in the end helps her to talk about the young man she once loved before he went away to the war.

When it is reported that a child in her care has been found dead the HQ vultures circle. Can she survive? Billy, a client in his early years, has 'information' but can she compromise her principles and act on it?

What became of my real life manager? I determined not to publish my story while she was alive. On hearing from a reliable source that she had died I phoned to commiserate with her family only for 'Miss Perfect' to answer. I visited and broke it to her that she was dead. She laughed, she always laughed a lot. A year or two passed. When no Christmas card came in 2016 I phoned to make sure only for the deceased to answer the phone.

I always believed I had a good story to tell yet without TLC, the mentoring of Tom Bromley, the final assessment report and the industry day, I would never have completed my novel. The range of help Rebecca and Aki at TLC offer to aspiring writers is up there with the very best in the land. Advice is always unbiased and flannel free. Yes it does cost money but for some of us faltering souls it may make the difference between a final product and 'I'll finish it one day'. It did for me.

Beg, borrow or steal the money if necessary. Or be like the government and just print the stuff.

Miss Perfect by Bernard Hall

Extract

County policy dictated that they must travel to the Farrants in Lorraine's car; mileage rates were lower for junior officers than for area controllers. It was an economy measure. 'Save the pennies and the pounds take care of themselves,' the old Director used to say. With the new Director it was more a case of saving the pennies to inflate the pounds in his salary. There were few men whose work she could respect or admire. Neither the Director nor his underling Puttock found their way on to her long list of such men. Neither did Dan, her ambitious deputy. In fact where men were concerned the long list was rather a short list.

Lorraine unlocked the car doors and they climbed in. A nervous passenger at best, Miss Perfect could only hope that Lorraine's driving might prove more sensible, more sedate, than some other aspects of her behaviour.

A pretty little thing, she thought, looking at Lorraine. If only she would cover more of her body with work-day clothes, if only she used less make-up, more subdued colours. As it was she might be better employed behind the cheap cosmetics counter at Woolworths in the High Street. Yes, definitely more suited to shop work even if she was a qualified social worker with a degree from some university or other in Cape Town. 'A typical shop girl,' her father would have snorted. She redoubled her determination never to eat South African oranges.

On these rare occasions when she went out of the office she much preferred to be driven by one of the men, preferably one of the more mature men. Alan was very reliable even if his car always smelled of cigarettes. Now she would have to be brave and make sure Lorraine kept her eyes on the road.

As the car juddered into motion she gripped hard on something close to her right hand till Lorraine said, 'Madge can you take your hand the fuck off the handbrake asseblief?'

'So sorry, I thought it was a... oh, I don't know what I thought, didn't think I suppose.'

When she released the handbrake Lorraine said, 'buy a donkey.'

'Why would I buy a donkey?'

'Ach sus Madge, I'm sorry man, I just slupped into Afrikaans, baie dankie is thanks.'

She closed her eyes. To take her mind off Lorraine's use of the four-letter word and her driving she gave thinking time to one of the great issues currently plaguing her: she had known for a while that the usage 'Miss Perfect' would have to go – at first she had held firm against change but now she must give in and accept the social workers calling her 'Madge'. Lorraine had fired the first shots in the battle but so far it was only the bolder staff following her into the breach. Surely it would be better if everyone called her by the same name? Why fight a battle she had no hope of winning? She might as well surrender, lay down her arms, show the white flag. There would be applause, men and women in tears, children dancing in the streets of Moortown as the cry went out, 'Miss Perfect has moved with the times, all hail our modern Madge'.

Ha! Ha! To hell with moving with the times. Bow to the inevitable more likely. But the office staff, the admin girls, the typists, that would be different, they must continue to show respect.

Lorraine drove erratically, jabbering away while steering with one hand and all the while gesticulating with the other hand as they breasted the hill out of Moortown and followed the road that threaded through the genteel villages on the way to Brownlow. All the way cloud shadows lay floating like restless blankets on the surrounding hills.

'Have you been out on a possible non-accidental injury investigation before?' Madge asked.

'Nee, nicks man. But you know what Madge, I was sorry to hear about you leaving soon.'

'Who told you that?'

'I can't remember, nobody, nicks, it's just going around.'

Madge laughed. 'Well you can put it around that it is not true, a mistake, I'm not intending to go anywhere. The notion is quite ridiculous, I can't possibly afford to retire before I am sixty. Now let's concentrate on this visit.'

Somebody must have started this tittle-tattle. Dan? She certainly wouldn't put it past him.

'I've put my finger on the Farrants' problem,' Lorraine said, 'I see from the file that Mrs Farrant has a problem with masturbatory guilt. Perhaps I could do some hands-on work with her on that?'

'Hands-on?' Madge queried.

'Ja.'

'Perhaps you could.' Madge preferred not to contemplate what form this 'work' might take.

Madge remembered only too well the beginning student who, while undergoing part of his training in a placement in the office, had so diagnosed Mrs Farrant's 'problem'. The young man in question seldom strayed from talking loudly about the current success or otherwise of his beloved Manchester United and this foray into an aspect of masturbation represented a rare diversion. Almost everything sat oddly with his frequent proclamations that he was a Marxist – he seemed not to have read *Das Kapital* or fully understood any of the theoretical evils alleged against the capitalist mode of production beyond the rhetoric of the well-worn slogans. Garbled insights into Marx were like scrambled eggs in his head, sitting uneasily on toast made from the leftovers of the psychosocial theories of social work academics from America. Writing down such a confused and foolish belief about Mrs Farrant in the privacy and security of the office to impress a visiting tutor was one thing – drawing the hypothesis to Mrs Farrant's attention would be quite another. On the other hand the poor boy was not to know that the next person to pick up the file would be Lorraine, on her own admission one of Cape Town's finest.

Lorraine went on, 'As the file note points out, in the particular sub-culture this family inhabits the father has very little interaction with his son, so we must also do something to modify the father's behaviour in that area.'

'You mean encourage him to take his lad to the football?'

'That as well, but more importantly we need to get to the crutch of the matter.'

'You mean crux?'

'Ach sus, ja man, crutch, like I said. It may be that mum's masturbatory guilt indicates sexual dysfunction in the marriage. I'll have to involve Mr Farrant of course. He may suffer from erectile dysfunction – not uncommon in men who drink too much, even at his youngish age. We may even have to look into his prostate.'

'Would that be wise?'

'Yis, vital. I think I'm going to find that erectile dysfunction is a factor. And counselling them on their lovemaking techniques may help. I could try that. I covered it in my degree. There is considerable statistical evidence that working-class men are incompetent at lovemaking. Especially in the north of England. Man, they never allow enough time for foreplay. I even read about it in a magazine when I was still in Cape Town. Ach man, don't you just know it, sex must be a big problem in the north of England.'

When Madge was young and in love she had somehow managed without 'foreplay' which sounded like a warm-up for a game of tennis. Things had been different then. Thinking of the number of children on the office's caseload Madge was not as sure as Lorraine about impotence in the northern male.

'You think that?' she said.

'Ja, I've found that already with the men around here.'

So that settled it, personal observation blanketing in its judgement of the men of the north.

'Perhaps the climate explains the difference,' Madge said, 'it being so hot in Africa must be a factor.'

'Ja,' said Lorraine, 'those boys in Cape Town sure are hot as hell, ja man, hot like an Indian Curry Madras in Durban.'

Worrying about Mr Farrant's reaction to the planned course of action, Madge started to say something but only got as far as, 'but...'

'No but about it Madge, we must confront Mr Farrant with his inadequacy, in a constructive way of course. They only have one child. That is significant. Why aren't there more kids? What have they been doing all these years? Mr Farrant needs to

know what his impotence means for Mrs Farrant. We must tackle the problem at that level if we are to have any hope of ending young Gary's sense of alienation, his feeling of falling through the cosmos and landing all alone on the veld outside Brownlow. We have to help him connect, get his fingers hooked in the safety nets of society, thus ensuring he is treated kindly by loving parents.'

Madge was rapidly losing the will to live, wondering again about the merits of euthanasia. If only Lorraine would say 'I' rather than 'we'. For 'we' were not going to do anything of the sort.

Hidden in a haze of smoke the rambling council estate at Brownlow awaited their arrival.

Slumped silently in her seat, a nervous passenger now anxious about what awaited them at their journey's end, Madge let the conversation lapse. The rolling countryside slid past lit by pale spring sunshine. The leaves on trees were at this moment greener than they would be all summer; heat and dust would soon dull their freshness. Examining her dislike of Lorraine she wondered if it could be envy that caused her to so resent this pretty young woman with every prospect of marriage and children. She so hoped it was not envy, a fault she despised.

They flashed past a roadside sign announcing 'You are entering Brownlow'. Almost immediately another sign proclaimed a thirty speed limit quickly followed by a notice warning that 'Speed Kills'. She glanced at the dashboard; Lorraine had slowed to fifty. Could she ever feel safe with Lorraine at the wheel?

How would Lorraine get on with Mrs Farrant? And Mr Farrant? The mischievous imp buried deep in Madge almost looked forward to Lorraine's first meeting with the Farrants, Lorraine tackling Mrs Farrant's little guilt problem. Then there was Mr Farrant and his little problem. There hadn't been a murder in Brownlow for a year or two.

The car swerved off the main road clipping the pavement on their way into the dreary post-war Coronation Gardens council estate on the outskirts of town. More often than not streets were named after favoured councillors; in this case it was a reminder of a Labour stalwart as they reached Keir Hardie Close, the Farrants' cul de sac. She wondered how the morning would end.

The tired curtains of the row of uncared-for council houses lining the street, the overgrown privet hedges, and the refuse-strewn front gardens, offered little cheer. How would Lorraine approach Mr Farrant? 'Nice to meet you. Do you suffer from brewer's droop Mr Farrant?' Madge had met the man but once, enough to remember a stocky man with a body like the trunk of a mature oak tree and murder in his eyes. A gentle giant? No, his police record spoke for itself.

As it happened, their visit took a while to begin as Lorraine was forced to brake, suddenly finding the road inexplicably blocked by an old carriage pram tipped on its side next to a derelict mattress that had long outlived its nocturnal usefulness, its rusted springs bursting through remnants of stained fabric. Beyond that lay two shredded car tyres.

Realising further progress was impossible without reorganising the impromptu street furniture, they abandoned the car where it had jerked to a stop. Hooking up their briefcases, differentiated in size and colour in line with their relative status, they advanced towards house number 9. Council policy dictated a standard plastic issue of briefcases for junior officers and a fake leather issue for more senior officers. Though unconfirmed it was rumoured that the Director carried a genuine leather briefcase for his sandwiches which he brought from home prepared and wrapped tightly in greaseproof paper by his wife. Council policies like those that differentiated briefcases, office furniture including carpets, and car allowances, were all aimed at reducing waste and minimising error. Stuff and nonsense, thought Madge, considering the waste that went on up at County Hall.

Reaching the cracked concrete path leading to the house, their final approach was temporarily halted by an old car seat reclining on the pavement barring normal access to the front door. Lorraine leapt over it, her long, slender legs scissoring through the air while Madge clambered awkwardly over the obstacle. More ladylike my way, she thought, no need for me to show off like that.

'Ello Miss Pisspot!' It was young Gary Farrant, loud as usual, who had tumbled laughing and farting in his torn and ill-fitting clothes down the path to meet them. Gary Sebastian Farrant in full. Mrs Farrant had wanted to add Valium to the list of names, remembering the relief the tablets had brought to her pregnancy, but the vicar had demurred and, after some resistance, had managed to deflect her from such a secular act. Yet Mrs Farrant confided later that she still thought of him as

Valium. Boys, she said, needed names more than girls and Valium sounded foreign. It had been a difficult choice between Gary and Elvis. She hoped he would grow up to be a rock star on TV called Gary Valium. Valium, she believed, sounded better than Farrant. Gary's ambitions lay in other directions, however, for he had already decided he would become a pilot with the Red Arrows.

'Hello Gary,' said Madge cautiously, pleased at the apparent warmth of the welcome.

'Fuck off,' shouted Gary. There was a sudden menace in the way he snarled, his face folding like plasticine sausages of loose skin from an innocent smile to a blank, expressionless stare. Perhaps he saw the unexpected visitors as a threat. 'Hoo's she?' he demanded, pointing a fist suspiciously at Lorraine.

'She's Miss Burgher. She's your nice new social worker from South Africa.'

Lorraine smiled broadly. 'Hello Gary, I've heard so much about you and it is lekker to meet you. Ach sus you are a big boy for seven!'

'Ah'm eight. Fuck off.' Gary laughed hysterically but without mirth.

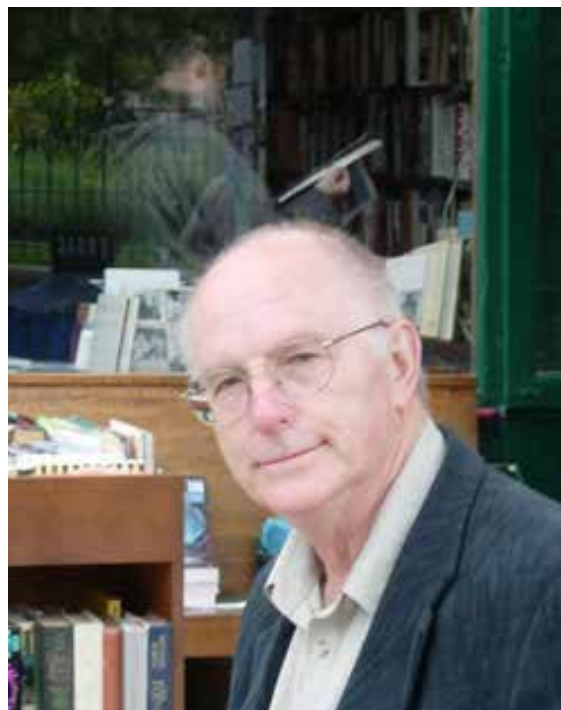
Mrs Farrant emerged from the front door looking dismayed. 'What gans on? Ye knaa Gary yer not te talk to the people from the effing welfare like that. Ah ken the lass taalks funny but... the lass is foreign... eeh Miss Porfect, ah'm sorry, but ah divven knaa where he learns that effing aaful language. Ah've complained to the school ye knaa. And his father's cracked him. Kids got no respect these days. By – but ah would never have dared taalk te me social worker or me probation officer like that when ah was a bairn. Ah'd have got a good hiding off me dad, bastard God rest his soul.'

Sounds just like mine, Madge thought. Men.

About the Writer

Bernard Hall was fortunate in the English teacher at his secondary school on the south coast of Natal, South Africa in the 1950s. 'Jock' Graves, a demoniacal Glaswegian, enthused a love of literature into the ears of his drowsy pupils.

Early faltering footsteps included short stories published in *International Story Contest*, a monthly collection on sale at station bookstalls which were good for the ego and worth five pounds a time. A story submitted to John Pudney for his *Pick of Today's Short Stories* came back 'near miss'.



After graduating he worked for the Scottish Widows' fund in Edinburgh and then taught economics in the universities of Glasgow and Durham before moving to social work.

A novel about the U.S. Polaris nuclear submarine base on the Holy Loch where he lived at the time got as far as a New York agent but no further.

Short stories in *Atlantic Monthly* including work by students of Paul Engle at the Writers Workshop at the University of Iowa, the first creative writing degree programme in the U.S., provided inspiration. Bernard applied, was accepted and offered a scholarship. The funds were insufficient.

Bernard's media contributions included poems in the BBC North radio programme *The Northern Drift* edited by Alan Plater. *The Heroes of Labour*, a poem about the Durham Miners' Gala, prompted a note from Alan Plater 'I loved this piece'. Humorous pieces were performed by Alex Glasgow on the BBC Newcastle evening radio news programme. Light-hearted articles appeared in the *Northern Echo* then edited by Harold Evans.

Over the years writing groups and courses included creative writing at Birkbeck (led by Caroline Natzler) and writing life story at Faber (led by Gillian Slovo).

He is currently finishing a memoir about growing up in apartheid South Africa and an account of the life and times of his great-great grandfather born in Cork who eloped with a nun and died a member of the first Cape parliament. He continues to contribute to research and writing on early South African cricket history in the context of racism and empire.

Miss Perfect may be a perfect coda to a life of literary near misses; the lesson is never give up. A sequel to *Miss Perfect* may follow.

You can find Bernard:

On Twitter: [@bernardthall](https://twitter.com/bernardthall)

You can buy the book:

<https://www.amazon.co.uk/Miss-Perfect-Bernard-Hall/dp/1785899309/>