



TLC SHOWCASE

MARK BLACKBURN

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Introduction to *Final Approach*

As I eased down on my dual commercial career selling shoes and working in property, I did more and more writing. I had some success with short stories and was working on a novel when I mentioned a particularly spicy story (which occurs in *Final Approach*) to a friend. They were so gobsmacked by the tale that they came out with that clichéd response – “You should write a book about it.” Well, I was already writing... so I did.

I had some early success with this too. I hadn't written much of it when my mother told me about a writing competition to celebrate Heathrow Airport's 70th anniversary. She asked me to enter a story of hers, which involved a forced diversion to Entebbe and forty-eight hours as an involuntary guest of Idi Amin. I thought I'd enter an extract from my work-in-progress too, a description of the Queen's building, the seaside pier-like terrace on top of Heathrow's Terminal 2 back in the seventies where I spent whole days at a time as a boy planespotting.

We both won prizes in the competition – my mother a Boot's Protect and Preserve travel kit, and me – first prize, a trip to Sydney! In the end I was unable to go – you can find out why in the book. But with this success and other extracts from *Final Approach* being published and being shortlisted for prizes, I felt certain I'd find a publisher.

It didn't happen. I turned to The Literary Consultancy and others for advice. I joined the TLC Write Club Plus programme where I found support and the tools I needed to progress. A major step forward was achieved with a TLC manuscript assessment; I realised I had to successfully find a way to bind the mix of aviation travelogue and family memoir. Newly armed, I entered the TLC Pen Factor Pitch Prize – and was shortlisted.

All systems go. Ready for take-off, I made new overtures to agents and publishers and *Final Approach* was taken up by the wonderful Claret Press, who I sincerely believe have made what I hope is a good book even better! Fasten seat belts, enjoy the flight.

Extract from *Final Approach* by Mark Blackburn

It's a very long time since I got the binoculars out and spotted a plane, but I still dream about them. Often. Not quite a recurring nightmare, but a recurring theme – planes crashing.

Usually I'm back at my mother's house, which I left forty years ago, when I first started looking up at them in the sky. Even the earliest dream I can remember was about planes – sort of. I imagined I was awake and outside very early on a summer morning, hours before anyone was up but still light. I saw something overhead which looked like a hovercraft. Then I found out hovercraft couldn't fly thousands of feet up. That didn't dampen my conviction in what I'd seen; I didn't believe it was a dream, though it must have been. And I had to admit, I did have a track record. I was a sickly child and often in a high fever, to the point where I'd hallucinate. First there was the monkey under my bed, then (don't laugh) Tich and Quackers living behind the headboard. Tich and Quackers were Ray Allen the TV ventriloquist and his dummy, so in all probability they weren't living behind my headboard. But for quite a while I was very scared about going to bed.

I'm less confused now. When I have a dream, I know it's a dream. My last plane crash nightmare was very vivid. There was a four-engined British Airways jet – not a real aircraft, some amalgamation of an Airbus and a jumbo, and it was pointing down at an improbable angle, and far too low. That's a common pattern in the dreams; the planes are always wrong – wrong altitude, wrong attitude. I've watched thousands of planes from the roof terrace at my mother's, and in an easterly wind they all approach Heathrow the same way. In a westerly wind they take off over the house and are too high to catch by the time they pass over the house. Landing, they make a gentle loop onto finals, then the slide down across Windsor Great Park and over the castle. But these dream planes have gone rogue.

The last dreamliner was just a few hundred meters from the house, far too close to the fields behind, pointed towards the earth. Sure enough it went down, the point of impact hidden behind a dreamed-up tower block, part of the expanding new town nearby. True, the town is in reality spreading across the Green Belt, but at a fraction of the rate it does in my dreams. There was a moment's peace before the fireball and smoke erupted over the building, and the boom shook its windows.

The nightmare landscape around my mother's house must be littered with the broken fuselages from all these dreams. This time was worse than usual; I was out in the

open, but there was no time to make a futile run towards the plane before the block of flats tumbled down, over the house. My mother miraculously survived, but soon the security services (I was glad to see they were still functioning in this post-apocalyptic netherworld) had walled off her home. Despite their efforts, I could see through a gap to people looting the rooms, shredding the tissue of my heritage.

Like the broken planes of my dreams, LXX Lincoln International Airport doesn't really exist. I made up the IATA code, which doesn't relate to any real airfield, and Lincoln is the name given to the fictional Airport in Arthur Hailey's novel, the first disaster blockbuster. The novel reflected the glamour of modern air travel, but also the terror of it; why wouldn't one of these metal tubes just fall out of the sky, especially on a stormy, snowy night? My own nightmares illustrate these deep fears we have about planes and flying; even me, someone who loves the bloody things and loves flying in them and has done so hundreds of times. Why are we so scared?

Planes do crash, of course. There's a piece of 'raw data' I still have, a list of spotted plane numbers written on the blank pages of an unused old diary. I would say from the traffic recorded they were the haul from a day's work at Heathrow. There's twenty-two numbers on the left-hand page; I did some research on these, and I can see at least two of them have crashed.

Still, as they're always telling you, air travel is one of the safest modes of travel. It's true if you measure it in terms of fatalities per kilometre travelled; 0.05 deaths per billion on a plane compared with 3.1 per billion on a car. Which is why an awful lot of planes fly for thirty or forty years and don't crash. So what happens to them? Well, they end up in a graveyard. Or a boneyard, as they call them in aviation circles. We visited one once when we were on one of our US holidays, Mojave Air and Space Port. A trip to Disneyland which we subverted to our plane habit, Jumbo not Dumbo. Rows and rows of airplane husks neatly lined up in the desert, aircraft bones never rotting in the hot sun.

The largest boneyard is at Davis Monthan Airbase in Arizona (which incidentally boasts a high incidence of UFO sightings, but let's stick with planes emanating from Planet Earth), and this houses over 4,000 wrecks, although admittedly most of those are military aircraft rather than airliners. The one we visited, Mojave, is home to a thousand airliners, and between them the aircraft graveyards of the West Coast States house tens of thousands of planes.

So if air travel's so safe, and all these planes end up in the desert after flying for decades without ever crashing, why do people get so scared?

There is of course the terrorist incident that can never be ignored or forgotten. The images of the airliners puncturing the Twin Towers are seared on everyone's consciousness, images so extreme that they contort into nightmares at the very edge of credibility, exaggerating our fear of flying and ever ready to flare up in our imagination. I do wonder if my own horrible plane dreams would have been so frequent and so vivid if September 11th 2001 had never happened. Thank God my visions are just dreams, and no one I know was on those planes or in those buildings.

But like everyone else I won't forget my first exposure to those judderingly graphic film clips, at the beginning of the forty-eight hours when we wondered if civilisation had ended; if Bush would push the button deep underground in the remote bunker he himself had been renditioned to at Offutt Air Force base, Nebraska. I was working up in Northumberland running another shoe retail business, that day making store visits with the Property Manager. Having heard the news, the staff in the Swalwell branch on the Newcastle outskirts had turned the shop TV on. We watched as stunned as everyone else while the unimaginable happened on the screen in front of us, numb with anticipation at what might happen next. The phone lines creaked and mobile networks fragmented as folk failed to give and receive token reassurance to and from loved ones. I eventually got through to my wife, hundreds of miles south.

I was due to fly the very next day and I did, from Newcastle to Dusseldorf for a trade fair. There were a few of us going – I was boss, but the whole buying team were on the trip. I gave people the choice about coming, and everyone did. I have never known a terminal as quiet. Barring the odd stab at gallows humour, passengers shuffled through passport control and an unsurprisingly rigorous luggage check with barely a murmur, the usual airport hubbub switched off.

Nothing happened, of course. And the truth is, it very seldom does – since 9/11, the American translation we've been forced to adopt, not a single British life has been lost in a terrorist attack on aviation. But the attack is still used an excuse for the ever more elaborate and time-consuming processes of airport security.

As someone who's spent too many hours of his life in those secret little rooms just off corridors through customs halls, I'm well aware of the inconsistencies. Often when I was working in France I'd drive rather than fly, especially if I had to take a load of stuff with me. Frequently I'd be waved through security without a glance. One time, just as I reached the UK barrier on my way out, I couldn't find my passport anywhere, and pulled up to one side while I looked for it. The officials wandered up to me, and I braced myself for their questions. They just asked me what was wrong, and when I explained they

merely waved me through, telling me the French side didn't normally bother to check documents. Sure enough, they didn't, and I carried on my way.

The only time I've ever been in real danger in the air was when my own father was the pilot – the helicopter trip home from school. But when I was that schoolboy, I found planes reassuring; the tail lights of that evening jumbo might be Daddy coming home. Now I dream of jumbo jets crashing into the fields around the old family house. We wonder how long my mother can stay there before the money runs out. The family's gone from rags to riches and almost back again, not in three generations but in just one. My father has blown all the money on women, boats and yes, private jets, and is seemingly determined to live long enough to finish the job despite kicking death's door more than once. I still have desires, ambitions and dreams, but I wonder if I have the energy and the years left to fulfil them. That's the real nightmare.

About the Writer

Mark grew up at the rural end of Berkshire, but arriving in London during the heyday of punk, he felt that was where he belonged. Sundry abortive attempts at stardom followed, as a stand-up comedian, actor and musician.

A successful career there as a shoe-seller followed, but Mark now lives in Somerset, England, doing what he loves best - writing.

His work ***Final Approach: My Father and Other Turbulence***, part-memoir, part-travelogue, will

be published this November by the Claret Press. Extracts from ***Final Approach*** have been published and won prizes, including a trip to Sydney. He has written a number of short stories, poems and other pieces of creative non-fiction which have been published online and in print.

Dame Margaret Drabble selected Mark as Runner-Up in the 2022 Interact Ruth Rendell Short Story Prize, saying how much she loved and related to his story, ***The Wall***.

In a departure from his usual writing, Mark wrote a book for local children confined to home during lockdown. ***Brian The Barrington Bear*** was so well received that the book was published more widely, its successful reception ensuring that a sequel ***Brian The Flying Bear*** was released this summer.

He regularly reads and performs his work at events and literary festivals in the South-West, and has appeared in the media talking about his writing and the writing process. He has a considerable social media presence with over 6,000 followers across Facebook, Twitter and Instagram.

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