



TLC SHOWCASE

Alex Crockford

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Introduction to *The Time Capsule Murders*

“My name is Roger Whiteley, and I’m going to tell you about a couple of murders I got embroiled in recently.”

Seventeen years ago, bumbling law student Roger Whiteley and a group of his contemporaries gathered for a pre-graduation party in Cambridge. During the evening they made secret predictions about their futures, which they locked away in a time capsule.

The group, older but not necessarily wiser, reassemble in college to open the capsule on the allotted date, but less than twenty-four hours into their reunion one of them is stabbed to death and the capsule itself goes missing.

As old secrets bubble to the surface it becomes clear that several members of the group are hiding sordid secrets.

Whiteley turns for assistance to his former tutor Gerald Sinclair, a criminology professor, amateur detective and self-proclaimed genius with a peculiar set of skills.

The unlikely duo find themselves on a treasure hunt set by a dead man, as they race against time to track down the capsule, solve the crime and unlock the mystery before the killer can strike again.”

The Time Capsule Murders is a cosy(ish) romp with its tongue firmly in its cheek, designed to appeal to a lot of the same people as the Thursday Murder Club series by Richard Osman and the Bryant & May series by Christopher Fowler. Outside the world of mystery writing, I have also been particularly influenced by PG Wodehouse and Tom Sharpe. *The Time Capsule Murders* is intended to be the first of a series, and I am already beaver away on the next instalment, *The Extra Skeleton*.

The Literary Consultancy was an absolutely invaluable resource in helping me rework what was a pretty rough first draft into something more carefully honed. My reviewer provided a comprehensive, detailed and thorough review of my manuscript, highlighting the aspects he thought worked as well as the aspects that didn’t, and gave me exactly the expert third party analysis I needed to be able to review my own work in a more objective light, which was all the more helpful coming from someone who has published several highly successful novels of his own and has a thorough understanding of the market for this genre.

Extract from *The Time Capsule Murders*

We were now in one of the more obscure little nooks that St Crisps is teeming with. This one was playing host to the college recycling skip, from which a rather full-bodied smell wafted towards us.

“I’ll bet you wish I were the proud possessor of a snuff box now, eh, Whiteley?” Sinclair chuckled as he strode purposefully towards a door a little way past the skip.

“Is this where his office is now?” I asked. “You’ve moved him!”

“Such matters are above my humble station,” Sinclair replied with modesty that could not have been more “faux” if it had worn a fake moustache and dark glasses. “But my understanding is that there is a sense amongst the upper echelons of the college that dear old Ronnie is rather outstaying his welcome. He is reacting in a rather Nelsonian fashion to the beckoning hand of retirement. He hasn’t been responding to the subtler hints that they’ve been dropping his way with a resounding clang. They’ve tried everything. Not letting him loose on any more students. Presenting him with a carriage clock and various books about fishing. Holding retirement parties for him. That unfortunate accident during the Fellows’ clay pigeon shooting expedition. All to no avail. So it was felt that inching him out by offering him less congenial accommodation, pointedly close to the fire escape, might have the desired effect. The results thus far have been disappointing, I fear!”

At least they had allowed the poor old sod to stay on the ground floor, I was relieved to discover. Sinclair rapped smartly on the door to his office. We heard movement from within, followed by a fit of productively phlegmatic-sounding coughing and some protracted fumbling with the latch. It was a full minute and a half before the door opened and a bleary birds’ nest of a face peeked out at us.

Ronald Fairbanks had to be in his early seventies by now, but he looked a decade older. A devotee of shabby brown suits, Fairbanks had not been the most dapper of men even two decades ago, and even then, the tobacco stains on his fingers had been matched by the ones spreading down his dishevelled beard like brown fungus. Both sets of stains had since darkened to an unhealthy mahogany colour.

The old boy grinned, revealing an incomplete collection of copper-coloured teeth, which had visibly dwindled since I had last seen him. If I was being unkind, I

might have suggested that Santa had been down a few too many chimneys. He had certainly sampled far too many glasses of brandy at the bottom of them. But for a man who was obviously falling apart faster than a suspension bridge made entirely of bran flakes, he seemed remarkably cheerful.

"Jerry Sinclair, you frisky old fornicator," he chirped at us in a reedy voice. "How's it hanging?"

Sinclair winced. Needless to say, he refrained from answering the question directly. I got the sense that, bizarrely inapt though the description of my supercilious companion as a "frisky old fornicator" might be, he was in fact more offended by being referred to as "Jerry."

"Hello, Ronnie. How's the article going?" he responded instead. "Something about *Rylands v Fletcher*, wasn't it?"

"Don't talk to me about that prize pair of 'See You Next Wednesdays!'" Fairbanks exclaimed. "I sincerely wish they had never crossed paths. Can't think of one original thing to write about either of the smug bastards. My Muse was always a tempestuous harlot at the best of times, but now it seems she has shackled up permanently with that twat from Downing who churns out three articles a month, damn his eyes!"

Stifling a belch, not particularly successfully, Fairbanks waved us into the room, gesturing vaguely in the direction of two armchairs that had perfected that much sought-after "just hauled out of a skip" vibe. The one item of furniture in the room that bore even the faintest veneer of respectability was a wooden globe in front of his bookshelf. Thither Fairbanks tottered unsteadily, turning and giving us a gleeful grin as he reached it.

"Sharpener?" he asked, raising the lid of the globe to reveal an impressive array of whiskies. I was not particularly surprised. The drinks globe was a recent (post-2006) innovation, but not an uncharacteristic one. When I had been an undergraduate, I had known for a fact that the cover of Craig and De Burca's *EU Law: Texts, Cases and Materials* on his bookshelf had played host to a rather delightful bottle of Bunnahabhain, which he had allowed his supervisees to sample one rainy afternoon. To this day it remains the only time I have ever derived any pleasure from opening that book.

"I don't believe I am in need of sharpening right now, thank you," Sinclair declined gracefully as we got ourselves as comfortable as was realistically achievable

in his sagging armchairs. "Although I am sure Whiteley here will join you!"

I was not quite sure I cared for the insinuation, but my pride quickly gave way to my thirst, and I had no hesitation in accepting a wee dram of 18-year-old Glenfiddich.

"So, what brings you and Mr, er, Whately, is it?"

"Whiteley," Sinclair corrected him before I got the chance. "This is Roger Whiteley. He studied here a few years ago. You taught him tort. Which is not as tautological as it sounds!"

"Tort in the first year, land law in the second year, equity in the third year," I added helpfully. It was no coincidence, I suspect, that my three weakest marks had been in those very subjects. I vividly remember the revision seminar just before my equity exam in my final year. We were supposed to come in with any questions we had from rereading the texts that he had set us during the year. My first question was met with an incredibly reassuring "FUCK! FUCK! Right, don't panic! We've still got a week till the exam; let's see what flotsam and jetsam we can salvage...." In the end, most of us had scraped through.

About the Writer

By day, Alex Crockford is a solicitor. The narrator of his story, Roger Whiteley, is not a self-portrait, as Alex would hope that he is quicker on the uptake than the unfortunate Mr Whiteley, but those close to him would undoubtedly spot one or two parallels. Alex lives in Cambridge with his wife, eleven year old son and two rather large, bumbling ragdoll cats. Alex's hope is that this novel and, with a bit of luck and a following wind, its sequels, will make at least a small contribution to redressing the balance with Oxford, which remains firmly out in front in the fictional detective stakes, thanks primarily to Mr Colin Dexter! The Time Capsule Murders is his first published novel.

