

Foreword

The novels which most successfully explore the 1980s tend to share something of that decade's swagger. Martin Amis's *Money*, Jay McInerney's *Brightness Falls*, Bret Easton Ellis's *Less Than Zero*, Tom Wolfe's *The Bonfire of the Vanities* – all these shout their credentials like City traders, either in the ostentation of their style or in the spectacular breadth of their canvas. *The Conclave*, by comparison, is a chamber piece, subtle and faintly elegiac in tone, and it is this measured approach to a famously brash decade which makes it so intriguing.

Ostensibly, the novel is the story of a young man's life from his birth in 1960 to his arrival 30 years later at the threshold of fatherhood. But it is the period from 1981, when Martin Knight takes his first job in London and embraces a city he perceives as 'money in action', that chiefly concerns the author. Martin's pursuit of a well-paid career, and the trophies that it brings with it – in particular, an attractive wife who shares his expensive tastes – give his character its final shape, and place him in the new tribe of young urban professionals. It is a progression which Michael Bracewell chronicles precisely, studding his narrative with dates and even enumerating Martin's pay rises. At the same time, however, he makes it clear that the label 'Yuppie' is a gross oversimplification, and that what drives Martin is something much more complex than greed.

Martin is, from first to last, an aesthete. Born into an ordinary middle-class home on the outskirts of London, he yearns for a beauty which will transform his existence. But he himself lacks the creative gift – he is saddled, to his chagrin, with a good head for figures instead – and as he grows older this instinct becomes increasingly warped. First his boarding school turns him into a snob who mistakes 'luxury for beauty, and extravagance for art'; then, when his first experiences of love end in disappointment, he persuades himself that wealth is the

key to all he seeks. On leaving university, he declares his intention to become rich: imagination and inventiveness, he argues, are ‘Nothing without money’. Encouraged by the beautiful Marilyn, for whom shopping is a vocation, he signs up to the Thatcherite dream, and sets about earning – and spending – to the best of his ability, until the good times suddenly cease to roll.

The authors whose books Martin reads reflect his sensibility: Oscar Wilde, Rupert Brooke, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Marcel Proust, T.S. Eliot. Of these Fitzgerald is perhaps the most significant. *The Romantic Egotist*, the title he gave the first part of his own coming-of-age novel *This Side of Paradise*, describes Martin Knight as perfectly as it does Amory Blaine. As for Martin’s identification of wealth with beauty and romance, this clearly has echoes of *The Great Gatsby*, whose protagonist Martin counts among his heroes.

Like Gatsby, Martin succeeds in reinventing himself, though not to the same magnificent extent. He may be a beneficiary of the eighties gold rush, but he is not at the forefront of it. He works as a systems analyst rather than a financier, and creates his dream home in Bristol rather than the heart of London. Nor is the wild partying characteristic of that decade a feature of his life: rather, he and Marilyn are determinedly bourgeois in their behaviour, displaying ‘the security and confidence of solid middle age’. For them, money is something to be spent thoughtfully – though nonetheless extravagantly – on objects of beauty, which the author records at length, carefully itemising their purchases in a symphony of conspicuous consumption.

When *The Conclave* was first published in 1992, it seemed to parcel up and pass judgement on the previous decade with extraordinary swiftness. But it is more than just a mirror of its age. Some of its most striking passages are those which evoke the unchanging poignancy – and misery – of young love: above

all, in an excruciating description of a night at the opera which goes horribly wrong. Bracewell writes vividly, too, about the commuter's miserable lot and the heartlessness of office life.

To reread the novel after sixteen years is to discover a surprisingly prophetic edge to it. The materialism of the eighties, however much derided, has if anything been eclipsed by that of the early twenty-first century, as consumers – for all their lip service to sustainability – treat themselves to ever more wasteful luxuries, loading up their lumbering 4x4s with giant plasma screens and soon-to-be-forgotten designer clothes. Such self-indulgence is no longer the preserve of the highly paid professional: the man in the street, too, has become what Bracewell calls a 'privileged customer' in the 'vast and complex department store' of Western society.

Even more striking, however, is the way in which Martin Knight's conflation of art and money has spread to the wider world. Early in their courtship (the year is 1984) Martin takes Marilyn to see a Joseph Beuys exhibition: surveying the contents, which include cans of film, a shovel and twelve bottles of wine, he remarks that 'It's really very beautiful. In fact, it's like being in a shop.' No one could have guessed that a quarter of a century later Selfridges would be devoting floor space to contemporary art, and a boutique in Marylebone luring customers with a 'circus-themed installation'. Nor did we begin to imagine that the Yuppies of the next generation would measure their success in 'wall power', spending millions of pounds on pieces inspired not by a divine spark, but by business acumen.

Significantly, Michael Bracewell's writings in the intervening years have included exhibition catalogues for artists such as Gilbert & George and Sam Taylor-Wood; and perhaps *The Conclave*, with its detailed descriptions of clothes, furnishings and restaurant meals, is best read as a catalogue raisonné of life in the eighties. The plot, such as it is, certainly takes second

place to the exhibition and discussion of Martin Knight's state of mind as we pass through the eight sections (from 'An Aesthetic Education' to 'Life') into which the book is divided. The final tableau leaves us with an unanswered question (has Martin, offered a chance of redemption, learnt anything from his mistakes?); but, however one looks at it, this is a show well worth the price of admission.

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