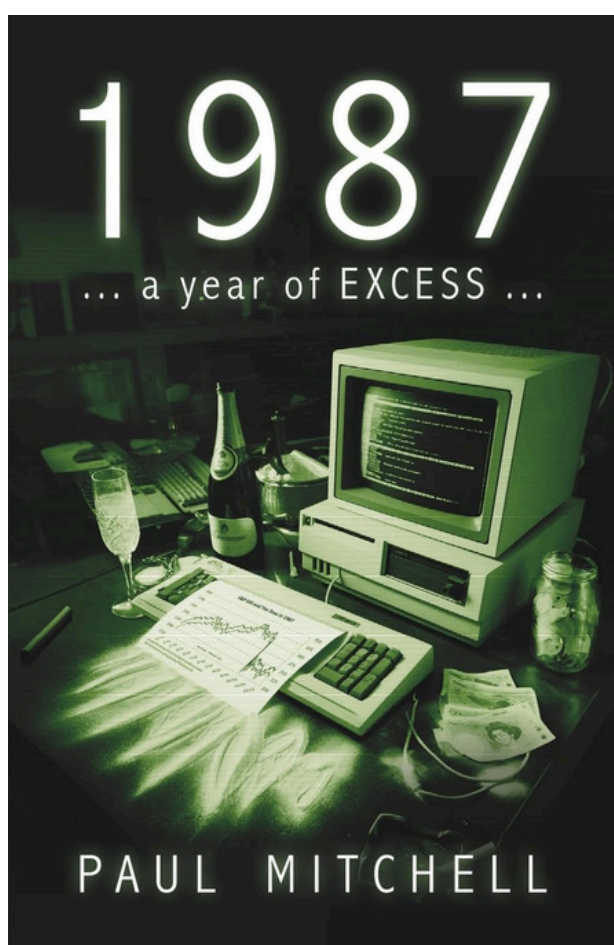


1987: A YEAR OF EXCESS

A BOOK REVIEW WITH AUTHOR PAUL MITCHELL
BY JORDAN CUNNINGHAM



INTRODUCTION

Money and its challenge to our morality is an age-old conflict as old as human documentation. From the biblical parable of the rich fool to the contemporary issues of capitalist greed, literature has found a perfect plot device in the conflicts of money and opulence. Whilst this is not the sole theme of 1987: A Year of

Excess by Paul Mitchell, the book sets out to explore multiple different themes from this perspective. Set in London, the novel presents a familiar tale seen in the novels of the city and the decadence of urban life. We are introduced to John Field and explore his adventures through London and all the different hijinks, experiences, and people John meets along the way in the London of the 1980s. Without spoiling the plot, the novel is a character study of various people as seen through the eyes of John, who serves as our window into the complex world of the time. Particularly from the 19th century onwards, this form of urban novel has been a popular device. The novel often explores the two sides to a metropolis, to the urban environment which promotes a shiny exterior which covers up and the grimier sides that lie underneath, both are external in poverty and the internal corruption of those who occupy the shinier sides of the city. The study of urban novels is a broad subject. However, generally, the central themes are the victimisation of people experiencing poverty, discrimination, and pollution. While 1987: A Year of Excess does not explicitly aim to expound on these issues, the story helps reveal them. 1987: A Year of Excess, for me,

descends from this tradition of the novel, which explores these themes and the effects of the urban environment and how it can corrupt or, at the very least, influence people. Whether we view the influence as wholly negative is complex and, in many ways, subjective depending on your worldview. On a broader scale, Michell's novel links to more than just the literary. Like the urban novel, 1987: A Year of Excess expertly illustrates a unique societal phenomenon at the time, which transcends London and speaks more broadly to the emergence of what is known as the 'Yuppie'. The Yuppie was a new variety of the middle class based around consumption, of attaining riches for a more opulent purpose, as a status symbol. As stated by Smith, Yuppie is a term "to refer to those young upwardly mobile professionals of the baby-boom generation...supposed to be distinguished by a life-style devoted to personal careers and individualistic consumption" (N. SMITH, p. 151). The onset of the Yuppie in the 1980s was seen as a "development of a 'new middle class'" (N. SMITH, p. 151) which derived from individuals ascending from working-class origins who progressed economically and socially by increasingly consummative enterprises which revealed themselves. These roles gave individuals "an increasingly prominent social role" in an "emerging urban industrial system" (N. SMITH, p. 152). This new model of the middle class was developed along a different model of the traditional middle class by "the ideology of consumptive pluralism [which prioritised] an urban dream [superseding] the suburban dream of past decades" (N. SMITH, p. 165). The urban dream played a significant role in shaping this new middle class. This created a "consumption society" (N. SMITH, p. 166), which is the society presented to us in 1987: A Year of Excess. With this context in mind, it helps us contextualise some of the characters' actions in the book, like John Field and his interesting bunch of friends.



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The first impression you will get from the book is the author's expert use of an ear for dialogue and humour, a skill that immediately draws the reader into the narrative. The characters and their speech patterns are expertly individualised. For instance, take this exchange between John and Ron Harris:

Next through the door was Ron Harris, affectionately known as "Chopper" after the notorious Chelsea full-back of the same name. Chopper was another of Rupert's "rough diamond" hires. A Southend resident with a penchant for cockney rhyming slang, although most of his slang had been invented by Chopper himself to make it sound like he'd spent his life in Brick Lane. "A bit plate of skate this morning son. Wanted to get in George Birley," was a fine example. The fact that the majority of the people working in the city would not have known the difference, allied with the fact that Chopper was in the habit of slurring his words together, meant that most people found him only semi-intelligible before lunch. Chopper was also a hopeless drunk, so post-lunch, you were lucky if you got every fifth word. His long-suffering wife seemed to have an inbuilt sensor for when he had been out on one of his long lunches and would call in to the office about 5 minutes after he had returned... usually around the 4:15 p.m. mark.

"Hello Ron, you been to lunch?"

"Mmm"

"You pissed again?"

"nnnn"

"You think by not saying any actual words I can't tell you're pissed?"

"ermm"

The narration gives an objective view of events while providing context for how John and others perceive Ron. This helps to establish the characters so that when we get to eavesdrop on their conversation, the humour of the dialogue is more pronounced, and we get a glimpse into the duality of people in the world of the novel, of the exterior of what people say and what they really think internally. John jokes, and Ron takes this as playful banter, which it is superficially, but it alludes to a deeper value judgement John feels for Ron and what Ron's drunkenness suggests. However, there remain common semantic threads which unite many of the characters in the book who share and co-inhabit the same world. This sets the scene and the world well and gives the reader a feeling for the aims and motivations of these characters, which, in their various ways, revolve around money and sex for most in the novel, except John, to a lesser extent, who we see struggle with this world. There are many examples of this; however, what I feel symbolically represents this best is the scene when Patrick O'Hanlon and a new recruit make bets with a group of other colleagues, many of them older, on a juvenile game of how many Big Macs the young recruit can eat and how many coins Patrick can fit in his foreskin:

On Tuesday there was going to be a Big Mac eating challenge and then on Thursday there would be settlement of a huge unofficial market-making exercise based upon the number of 2p pieces Patrick O'Hanlon could get in his foreskin.

The Big Macs were due to be consumed by one of the youngest members of the broking team who had recently joined from school aged 16 because he was related to Kevin, Grub's boss. He was mostly tasked with carrying papers around and got nowhere near any calls. A couple of weeks ago he foolishly commented whilst eating a Big Mac, "I could eat another five of them".

"Like fuck you could" was the reply from a gnarled old broker sitting next to him at the time.

This scene progresses to a scene parodying the stock market, where all present make bets on whether Patrick can win the bet. This is hilarious and preposterous for a group of men in seeming positions of power. The absurdity of the scene makes it the kind of thing you chuckle at out of embarrassment, but some people actually think it is funny. It is a great way to show the childishness of men and the danger that people like this have some semblance of importance in the world.

The author knows this world and the characters very well in how he represents the various levels of depravity and seediness. As evidenced in the examples above, there is a weird mixture of sexual perversity and an underlying corruption which merge to create these bizarre people, and through the expert use of dialogue to represent this faithfully and authentically. However, this sometimes risks bordering on knowing them too well, which can become uninteresting to the uninitiated. Often, these slices of life outside of our immediate experience need to be universalised, and often this is not done enough to maintain readers throughout the narrative. To demonstrate this, here is an example:

As his head of trading had said, Black-Hawkins had no say in it, and John was duly hired on a salary of £120,000 p.a. being £20,000 above what he had told Regal Bank he was earning at Ambrose. There was some embarrassment on his induction day with Black-Hawkins due to the fact that his P60 end of employment tax declaration showed his actual salary had been £47,000. Embarrassment is perhaps too strong a word for someone of John's psychological make up, and when questioned about it by Black-Hawkins his response was at first to waffle on about bonuses being taken into account and then, in a practically blatant admission of his subterfuge he finished with "well you wouldn't want someone trading bonds for you who can't negotiate would you?"

Whilst I appreciate the detail and the evident knowledge on show for a reader, it is too dense and would be much more effective if stripped down to the essential elements and what the reader needs to know. The dialogue is made snappier if less comes before it. One final example is:

Besides Nicola's advice on Century eggs, she had also warned John about the landing experience into Kai Tak airport in Hong Kong. He assumed she was just being a "bit of a girl" and was sure passenger aircraft of this size couldn't throw themselves about much, but nevertheless, with a window seat he was full of anticipation as he heard the captain say, "Cabin crew, seats for landing". The degree of banking the plane went into was certainly a little alarming, but even more surprising was the proximity of residential buildings to the wing tips. On the flat roof of one of these buildings was painted a huge "turn left" white arrow and he could make out the features of a small Chinese woman hanging out washing seemingly unaware of the huge jet above her head. Her two children were aware however and gleefully waved at the aircraft's occupants as it grazed the rooftops of the bustling city. John fully expected to get off the plane to see lines of washing draped around the wings they were so close.

This is a great paragraph, but the message and the humour could be conveyed much more strongly if the writing had more bluntness. For some readers, there could be too many diversions that need to be traversed to get to the destination. On a more positive note, there are evident narrative tensions in the novel around sex, class, and racial lines, which the author does a great job of illustrating through the character of Delroy, who is a taxi driver who has turned his life around from his younger days in a gang:

He knew he was lucky to have a garage. The council flat he lived in was on the third floor, which was the top floor, of a large development built in the late 60's. He could remember moving in like it was yesterday. The house his family had lived in until he was eight was knocked down in what they called "slum clearance" and had been a cold, inhospitable place, with the only heating being the open fires in the main rooms...Five years of running with the rude boys round the flats had brought him involvement in criminal activities and he started considering whether he was just now conforming to a black stereotype. Single mother, no father to discipline an unruly son, he was turning into one of the "youth" his mother used to single out as examples of bad upbringing, it would all culminate in doing some prison time somewhere, a path that once embarked upon was very difficult to withdraw from.

This passage and ones like it are exceptional character development, and they hit upon deeply ingrained issues of race and class, as well as the intersection between the two, which the novel explores to a great degree. I wish the author had included more passages like this one and delved deeper into this, as it drifts a little from the plot. Mitchell situates us in an acquisition-obsessed society where money rules all and, through this well-trodden plotline, introduces his unique flavour of a time and place in history. I wish the expertly crafted characters and writing were pushed more in sections.

A further point for me personally is the regional aspect of the novel. The London locale is an alienating device for audiences outside of these parameters, and a way to overcome this was the working-class link and universalisability of deprivation, which the author does a commendable job of accomplishing. The author accurately portrays 1987 London and the 1960s, of people growing up, and highlights points with which people from all walks of life can identify. Like *American Psycho* and *Money*, for instance, *1987: A Year of Excess* uses themes such as money, sex, and drugs to reflect upon a more profound significance that transcends their immediate settings and periods. This is done to significant effect; however, regionally, I saw a gap I wanted to see filled more. The most prominent example is the mention of the police hiring people from outside of London, from the North specifically:

The Met had a policy of putting PCs into the area that came from out of London. Preferably from a hard town up North, where there was no risk of any familial ties or school age relationships that could be used to influence them to be lenient. This usually meant from Glasgow or Liverpool and only served to poison relationships with the worthies of the East End even more. Some of them had been known to descend upon teenagers who were deemed "troublemakers" and pile them into the back of their Black Marias (or meat wagons as they were known) for a good kicking, as if this was some form of future crime prevention.

Here, a regional aspect which could be used to reflect on class and poverty is not explored. Why are Northerners recruited from up north to work in the South exactly? There is an intense layer missed here that I wish had been delved into more. A blind spot from the London locale, which, if explored, would enrich the author's more immediate concerns. As someone from the North, I want to see why this is. It suggests to me that power-deprived people from the North gain a form of power from the police, which is an opportunity to release some disenfranchisement against the South collectively. Why is this? I wanted the author to expand upon this. This is a good sign because the theme is interesting. I just wanted more. I got a massive stench of Thatcherism and Northern hatred for Margaret Thatcher seeping through, which persists to this day, all these years later. I was more interested in this story the author alluded to and chose not to tell fully. This story contained a more significant one for me, as this slight aside to the North is in many ways the legacy of my experience collectively, of neglect and being forgotten in favour of the South. I do not think the author intended this; I think, unconsciously, the author highlights a deeper problem about literature historically from a Marxist perspective. Books/words/utterance are capital, and what is most focused on is important; what is unimportant is mentioned and soon forgotten, reflecting the power dynamics and the distribution of attention in society.

A perfect example of universalising regional stories is encapsulated by 'Barn Burning' by William Faulkner. As a work written in 1939 by a Southern US author, which is set in the late 19th century, and uses extended dialogue in regional dialects, I should feel alienated from this story more than one set in 1987 London, but it is the opposite. 'Barn Burning' presents a stylised story containing universal truths that I can identify because Faulkner's South is my North. In 'Barn Burning', money and class separations cause both sides of the economic divide to see the other as the enemy and less human than themselves. This is shown in Michell's mention of the Northern police officers. Mitchell perfectly encapsulates London in 1987, and in some ways, London to this day, and I am intrigued by his perspective, both for what I fail to

see and vice versa. Whilst I may to some degree be alienated from the book, I feel this is not entirely negative. As readers, we should seek things outside of our perspectives to better understand the world, and this is what 1987: A Year of Excess can offer the reader: a view of a different world than the one they have known.

However, there are still some lingering similarities that transcend the regional. 'Barn Burning', as outlined by Fabijancic, is a work with an underbelly of what Georg Lukacs termed "reification", which "designates the generalized experience at all social levels of worker-based alienation resulting from the conditions generated by commodity fetishism" (T. FABIJANCIC, p. 75). This is further delineated into "[the] subjective side [entailing] the fragmentation or abstraction of individuals—the limited development or maturation resulting from specialized work activity under capitalism, the perception of labour as something irrevocably estranged, and a failed sense of vision" (T. FABIJANCIC, p. 76). Most significant for this analysis and its link to 1987: A Year of Excess is the statement that "it is the vision of these exploiters that is reified since they are so bound to the capitalist system that they cannot or will not see the results of their actions. Not only is their vision superficial, but their bodies are [also]" (T. FABIJANCIC, p. 81). Concerning 'Barn Burning', which features related themes of alienation from yourself and being told from the viewpoint of someone stuck between worlds, as the narrator of 'Barn Burning' is a child. There is more at stake for me despite the dispute being over a burnt barn; the circumstances gave it more significance than in 1987: A Year of Excess, where only John and a few others I cared for. 1987: A Year of Excess contains a great story, and my criticism is not intended to denigrate this; I just wanted it to develop more. It starts well and stays in the same register, which is fine, but I wanted it to broaden. The narrative is filled with characters obsessed with filling roles, of fitting into a capitalist system which alienates people from themselves to the point they become as artificial as the world around them. This struggle to fit into a system that does not value their true selves is an aspect I would like to have been explored more deeply. There are hints of this in occasional references to the dreams and thoughts of characters about desires and dreams. A significant one is Gerald Donat, who dreamed of becoming a stage actor:

Gerald was anything but your archetypal broker. He went to RADA when he left school and still harboured dreams of becoming a stage actor. His entrance into broking had come as a necessity after his father got into trouble with a stock market investment and he felt the need to do something more financially rewarding. His best friend at school had gone straight into the City and had started becoming fantastically successful. One night he told Gerald that if he went to work for the broker, he would pass all his business through him. When he told his parents about the chance, he could see the conflict in his mother's eyes. She knew what was in Gerald's heart but was also worried about the family house. Gerald accepted his friend's offer and now eight years later he had got used to the money. His father's fortunes had recovered, and the family house was no longer at risk. He had a rolling horizon for when he would throw it all in and go back to acting, but as he admitted to himself, it was always two years away. In the testosterone charged atmosphere of the brokerage house his cultured accent, theatrical ways, and his failure to take a copy of the Sun to the toilet with him soon had him marked down as "the homo in the corner".

My last point is about some of the beautiful passages in the book which I wanted the writer to employ more:

The scene that greeted them was of a biblical downpour, Taxis aquaplaning through puddles depositing bow-waves of rainwater onto any unfortunate pedestrians stupid enough to get anywhere near the kerb (p. 64).

This is an excellent piece of prose that transcends the plot itself and takes it outside of its immediate context. It universalised it by making the familiar, the mundane, unfamiliar and unique. I was crying out for more passages such as these. I love the humorous prose and dialogue, but sometimes I was looking for the beauty to shine through, even in a world so consumed by artificiality. Like Joyce describing the events of just a single day, the writing and prose make that day so significant and universal. If more passages that explore abstract beauty were inserted in the right places, a perfect juxtaposition between striving for false beauty and real beauty would be shown. I love the writer's style when they take these leaps and expand the possibilities of the story through more evocative writing.

C O N C L U S I O N

In conclusion, Paul Mitchell's 1987: A Year of Excess adeptly captures the complexities of urban life and the moral dilemmas surrounding wealth. The novel's appeal is evident, and the author's potential to improve upon this effort and make something just as good, if not better, should leave readers hopeful for the author's future works, of which I am included. The novel's rich characterisations and vivid setting serve as a backdrop for a narrative that, despite being tethered to a specific moment in time, transcends this period to offer some timeless insights that resonate beyond the confines of 1987.

S O U R C E S

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INTERVIEW

WITH AUTHOR PAUL MITCHELL

What motivated you to create and publish this book?

These stories and experiences from that time are deeply personal to me. I wanted to give a flavour of what it was like to live and exist within that time and space, sharing a part of myself with my readers.

Were there any specific themes or messages you aimed to explore in this work?

I wanted to illustrate a story with no value message per se. I believe in the intelligence of my readers, and I trust them to interpret and ascribe value or morality to the actions in the novel on their own.

If so, how successful do you feel you were?

Successful in the sense that humour predominantly is used to explore and describe sometimes serious subjects of that time period, and how humour is a vehicle for exploring complex subject matter.

What do you hope readers will derive from your book?

No specific message is intended to be told. On a subconscious or conscious level, I want readers to take something from the book that they can relate to their own lives and to give a window into the times and attitudes described.

Which authors/writers have had a significant influence on your writing, either stylistically or thematically?

I read a lot, but I had no specific writer in mind for how I wrote the book. Stylistically or thematically, I just told the story in the best way I knew how, personally, and what worked for me. There is the obvious allusion or parallel to George Orwell's Nineteen Eighty-Four; however, this was coincidental and not purposely intended.

What was the most rewarding experience you encountered during the writing process?

The most rewarding experience was memorialising that time, whether good or bad, of giving my perspective on a unique period for myself and the world I inhabited. It was a time of rapid technological advancement and societal change, which I sought to capture in my writing.

What would you offer as one piece of advice to aspiring writers?

I urge aspiring writers to be their own voice unabashedly. In a modern context, this is doubly important, as AI threatens to reduce or eliminate voices. We must preserve our distinctive voices and stories, akin to the oral storytelling tradition.

INTERVIEW

WITH AUTHOR PAUL MITCHELL

Did your personal experience inspire the book's creation, and how did that factor into the motivation for writing it and the creative process?

It was a story that needed to be told, at least for myself, as that world was a ridiculous world of greed and overindulgence. The book delves into excessive materialism and the societal impact of this, providing a unique perspective on a period of history marked by such characteristics.

What projects are you currently working on, and can you provide any previews or hints about your upcoming work?

Some have told me they would like a sequel. I have considered this; however, the inspiration has not occurred so far, and I will only commit once this inspiration reveals itself.

ABOUT

Paul Mitchell was born in Bethnal Green, East London early in the 60's and was educated at a long-established grammar school nearby. He moved to Essex with the birth of his three children and has been married since 1985. His career in the City began with a move from the construction industry in 1986 and lasted 30 years in various financial institutions culminating in 18 years at Mitsubishi Financial Group. The overwhelming majority of his career was spent trading Eurobonds. He is an accomplished musician and played football as a teenager for both Fulham F.C. and Watford F.C.. He is now retired and 1987 is his first book.

Links:

<https://www.amazon.co.uk/stores/author/B0D35VL1WF>



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