

Acne Mags: Identifying the Time Setting in Clive James' Novels through Bric-a-Brac Facts

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The late Australian-born Cambridge-based polymath Clive James (1939-2019) was one of England's most creative and innovative men of letters with a prolific literary production. At the same time, he led a terrific career as a popular TV anchor. His line of work was marked by the blurring, if not the suppression, of the border between high and low culture. Among his literary production his four fictional novels: *Brilliant Creatures* (1983), *The Remake* (1987), *Brrm! Brrm!* (1991) and *The Silver Castle* (1996), stand out for their wit, creativity and experimentation. Moreover, they look as if they really want to outline a portrait of their contemporary times. Despite the fact of lacking any explicit mentioning of when the action takes place, it is through very clear and constant allusions (and omissions) that one can gather the specific year when each plot happens, being most of these hints taken from the low culture realm.

The late Clive James, born in the Sydney suburb of Kogarah in 1939 and dead in Cambridge in 2019, was a polymath man of great knowledge and culture (he was fluent in seven languages). He had a terrific career both in letters and broadcasting. In the first field he was a noted novelist, poet and memoirist without forgetting that he was the father of television criticism. In the other field, he was an interviewer, a Formula One commentator, Television New Year's Eve Special's Master of Ceremonies and host of the first television programme about television. The constant feature of his career was the blurring, if not the suppression, of the border between high and low culture. So wide his range of interests were that he could easily deal from the advantages of being Australia a monarchy (2001: 252-282) to the way tennis players wear their cups (2005: 220). James was a pioneer in considering television as a cultural form, and, consequently, to be considered on equal terms as literature, theatre, art, music or cinema, stating that "Anyone afraid of what he thinks television does to the world is probably just afraid of the world" (1983b: 23).

Regarding his writing, James is best known for his *Unreliable Memoirs*, an autobiographical series of five volumes, and his TV criticism (a genre he, in fact, created) pieces. But it is in his four narrative novels: the encyclopaedic *Brilliant Creatures* (1983), *The Remake* (1987), *Brrm! Brrm!* (1991) and *The Silver Castle* (1996), where his skills and wit are displayed at their utmost. These stand out for their wit, creativity and experimentation. The four ones share a common feature: the writing is very meticulous and congruent. While being independent from each

other and not being sequels at all, some characters of a novel appear in a different one, sharing the four ones the same coherent universe. James' fiction is painstakingly well-grounded set as the author provides the reader with a lot of information about everything: characters, places, events, habits, current affairs... In other words, the narratives look as if they want to show the Zeitgeist they are set, that is, it seems their aim is to produce a testimony of modern times. This shows a strong influence from the Swedish writer Hjalmar Söderberg. But unlike the latter in *The Serious Game* (2019), James does not explicitly mention the year when the action of each plot happens. Nevertheless, he is constantly leaving clues in the thread through very clear allusions (and omissions). Being so clear-cut the reader, through them, can gather the specific year when each plot happens. The year each novel is set is quite a recent one from the time it was published and from a sequence ranging from 1980 to 1991. Although an important part of the hints are taken from political and intellectual history, the bulk of them are taken from mass culture elements such as television programmes, rock music, star system, films and gadgets.

Even among this foursome, it is the first one, *Brilliant Creatures*, the most outstanding one. In a sort of encyclopaedic narrative, it is about the ups and downs of the former-poet-turned-editor Lancelot Windhover. A Chardonnay socialist member of London high society with an irresistible appeal for women, he is going through the last stages of his marriage with scholar Charlotte. All of this set in a world of extravagant characters and parties. But not only that, this is an essay-like novel, with an Introduction, Scholarly Footnotes and an Index. The outcome is an intelligent satire of London Literary World where Playfulness and Historicism are constantly featured. This can be seen when the characters are compared with historical and cultural figures. Among the many good examples, these can be found: when Lancelot's Greek cook has left him a piece of steak and kidney pie that gets burnt (1983a: 79), in the corresponding note Lancelot is likened to King Alfred of England (280); through the affair of Lancelot with his last lover Samantha they are analogized to Paris and Helen from the *Iliad*, as Paris is also known as Alexander, the Library of Alexandria becomes a metaphor of Lancelot's mind (280); when Samantha quotes Hamlet asking Lancelot about his hurt bum (143), in the note Samantha is compared to Hamlet and Lancelot to Ophelia (283); or when the New Romantic children of Charlotte and Lancelot say goodbye to their mother and David Bentley, her new life partner, by blowing a kiss with their hands (146), the couple is likened to Romantic poet John Keats and Fanny Brawne (286). Thus, *Brilliant Creatures* becomes an encyclopaedic jigsaw, providing the reader with a deeper insight of the fabric of the novel on knowing the references.

Due to the hints displayed along the novel, published in 1983, it can be concluded that *Brilliant Creatures* takes place in the spring of 1980. Regarding political history, the note explaining the sentence "Lancelot felt that it had been raining continuously since the fall of the Attlee government" (67), depicts it as a symbolic one since "The Conservatives were returned to power in 1951. Lancelot could not really feel that it had been raining uninterruptedly for thirty years" (279). If one counts thirty beginning in 1951, the result is 1980. Lancelot has a job task; he has to cater the world's most famous young film star during her stay in England for the shooting of the "prestige feminist epic called *The Woman Lieutenant's Frenchman*" (62), a clear witticism of the film *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, which was shot in 1980. Curiously, during a flight Lancelot takes to Los Angeles, the film projected is another one with the same actress, where she plays the role of "a journalist assigned to the life story of a presidential candidate" (134). The only film featuring Meryl Streep with these characteristics is *The Seduction of John Tynan*, released in 1978. Once in California, Lancelot, lodged at a motel room, watches the news saying that the actor who starred Captain Video (141) was found dead after a long time

with nobody taking notice of his absence. It happens that Al Hodge, the actor who played in that American sci-fi series, actually died alone in March 1979. In Hollywood Lancelot is invited to his screenwriter friend Randall Hoyle's housewarming party. At the end of the party Randall advises Lancelot about his having such a young girlfriend, as the Polanski scandal (which happened in March 1977) is still fresh (139). Back at Heathrow (133) and through other scenes of the novel (163, 288) there are hints that it is an Olympic year, those Games would be Moscow '80. While taking a taxi for the first time in a long time, Lancelot Windhover is appalled of "how the financial structure" (48) of England has changed since Decimalisation (and specially of the pound) established on 15th February 1971, "in ways not necessarily to his benefit". When television host Sally Draycott meets Elena Fiabesco (the lover of Victor Ludlow, Lancelot's boss) for the first time the former wears a 1978 Chloë suit, whereas the latter a 1980 YSL pants suit (121). Victor, in his turn, is attended by his butler Galtieri (163), who became Argentina's dictator in 1981 (Crystal, 1994: 1162). Indeed, there is no mention at all of the Falklands War, which took place between April and June 1982. During one of the weekly lunches of Lancelot with his friends, they talk about "Australian press ownership" (1983a: 173) of Fleet Street. This is contextualised in the bitter struggle for the ownership of *The Times* between Robert Holmes à Court, Australia's first billionaire, and media mogul Rupert Murdoch (Crystal, 1994: 678), who already owned *The Sun* and *News of The World*. This lasted until 1981, when the latter contender managed to acquire it. At the same time, upmarket magazine *Tatler* was owned by Australian real estate businessman Gary Bogard from 1979 to 1982. This without forgetting the "Australia mafia" of journalists that dominated *The Sunday Times* from the 1960s to the 1980s. When David Bentley, Charlotte's new life-partner, speaks with an Austrian peer about Genesis' last concert in Vienna (1983a: 202), there is no mention of Phil Collins' first solo album *Face Value* (released in January 1981) nor is there any fear about the continuity of the group (Larkin, 1993: 297), something that propelled and only dissipated with the recording of their following two studio albums, *Abacab* in late 1981 and the self-called *Genesis* in late 1983 (497). Besides, Phil Collins stated that both Genesis mania and Phil Collins mania started in Germany with the release of the band's 1980 album *Duke* (Collins, 2016: 178). Another relevant piece of trivia is the fact that Anna Ford, from whom Sally Draycott is based, presented *News at Ten*, just like Sally herself (1983a: 249), until she left ITV in 1981 (Waugh, 1985: 122). Indeed, Sally is depicted as getting frustrated with her job. A further fact regarding Sally is her fondness of her Porsche 928 (1983a: 64), a model that started in 1978. Meanwhile, Charlotte is a proud owner of an Austin Maxi (128), which had its production ended in 1981. Besides, Victor is always driven around London in a Rolls-Royce Corniche (121) of which manufacture ended in 1980. And finally, one day "A white police Rover" (71) goes past David very quickly. Undoubtedly, it is a Rover SD1, the standard model used by the English police beginning its building in 1976. Later on, it is found the police turn up as there has been a terrorist attack against some Iranians (71-72). It happens that there was an assault into the Iranian Embassy in London by Arab terrorists on the 30th April 1980 with the SAS putting an end to it on 5th May. Other technological fields are relevant too, such is the mentioning of the VideoDisc (279), also known as LaserDisc, introduced in 1970 (Hawkins, 1991: 1728), but there is, curiously, a lack of any reference at all of the CD, invented in 1981. This gets linked to the factor that in the novel there are lots of mentions of 1980 and backwards but no mention at all of 1981 onwards events, which clearly sets the novel at a fixed time. For instance, there is no mention at all of Lady Di (as she became Princess in 1981), in contrast to *The Remake*, where she shows up continuously. Knowing the year when the novel takes place is relevant

since you can determine other points in the novel. As a matter of fact, being aware that the year is 1980, one can foretell the upcoming USA president, whose dear friend is Elena and with whom she talks for so long on the phone before setting in the White House (1983a: 97-98). He can be no other than Ronald Reagan as he was elected precisely in 1980 (Crystal, 1994: 786).

Published in 1987, *The Remake* handles the neurosis of television astronomer Joel Court flirting fleshly and intellectually with the Mole Blunt, a university student very fond of postmodernism who happens to be the lover of his best friend Chance Jenolan. Through the glimpses that come ahead, it can be deduced that all of this happens during the summer of 1984.

Cambridge is depicted as being rolling in money since Silicon Fen (1987: 17) is giving out huge riches. This is due to the cyber-boom that began in the first half of the 80s with the appearance of PCs and microchips. As Cambridge was a leading IT centre already, its technological entrepreneurs got massively wealthy. Among Australia's feats mentioned by Joel is the winning of the America's Cup (35). This took place in the 1983 edition. He also mentions the wedding of *The Thorn Birds* actress Rachel Ward (35), which took place on 16th April 1983. Phil Collins is also said to sport short hair (36) so it cannot be after 1985, with the release of his *No Jacket Required* album. Joel fantasizes with a film about Bertolt Brecht starring Klaus-Maria Brandauer and Meryl Streep (46) without any mention of *Out of Africa*, which was released in 1985. Besides, the Mole Blunt is a huge fan of the series *Auf Wiedersehen, Pet* (61), about the experiences of a group of Geordies working as bricklayers in Germany, which started being broadcast in 1984. While the Mole Blunt listens to Shostakovich, Joel Court watches a Channel 4 News report on Lady Di (56). The then-alternative Channel 4 began broadcasting on 2nd November 1982 (Watson, 2015: 367). Later it is commented that commissioning editors for Channel 4 is the right job for unskilled and creatively talentless people (1987: 123). Joel is also fond of CNN, started in 1980, constantly watching it (66, 97, 134) and getting obsessed with the famine taking place in Ethiopia (97, 179) between 1983 and 1985 under the Derg regime. Curiously, there is no mention of the Live Aid concert that took place in 1985. Chance is absent as he works with Peter Hall in both the National Theatre and Glyndebourne Festival (69). Indeed, Peter Hall was the director of the National Theatre between 1973 and 1988 (Crystal, 1994: 417) and of Glyndebourne Festival from 1984 to 1990. Both Joel and Chance declare having seen *Tootsie* (released in 1982) twice in the cinema each (1987: 78). Besides, Donna, Joel's daughter, gets very angry when losing at Trivial Pursuit (26), a board game launched in 1981, being its sales rocketed in 1984. The Mole Blunt states that the dress she is going to wear at a party for the publication of Chance's new book is "OTT" (104), an expression taken from a youth show with the same name which started being broadcast in January 1982. At the same party Ambrose, her "official boyfriend", complains to her that the party looks like a Swatch advert (121), Swatch being launched in 1983. At the party, after talking about broadcaster TV-Am's problems (122) that happened in Spring 1983 and seemingly to be solved by the end of 1984, the title of a new essay is commented: "From 'Duel in the Sun' to 'The Jewell in the Crown': [the latter a series premiered on 9th January 1984] a Study in Semiotic Imperialism" (124). Putting this together with the assessment that film director David Lean edited *Passage to India* (also released in 1984) in the kitchen of his Docklands flat (126), both *showing* an emphasis on the Raj Revival of the 80s. In addition, it is said the knowledge of the place where Lean assembled his films made the Docklands shift into a very trendy place to live. The redevelopment of the Docklands began in 1981 as a solution for the closing of wharfs in the Isle of Dogs. There is also some talking of another royal wedding in a year at the earliest

(134). Undoubtedly, it is the Duke of York's which took place in July 1986. The beginning of AIDS scare is featured, as the action of getting into the party on the arm of a gay painter is considered a brave action (111); in addition, Joel is compassionate towards homosexual men's late fate (139), Chance writes to the Mole Blunt that in Rio "even the goats have Aids" (76) and at the end of the novel both Chance and his wife Angelique Visage are rumoured of having contracted it (222). All of this is set upon the rise of AIDS epidemics and the discovery of its root HIV in 1983 and the death of its first casualties. With regards to Chance's collection, this novel does mention CDs indeed (135) in contrast to *Brilliant Creatures*. As the Mole Blunt is very fond of Sade (69), Joel Court tells the Mole Blunt that he is the only Englishman of his age that likes Sade's "Smooth Operator" (136) from the debut album *Diamond Life*, released in July 1984 (Larkin, 1993: 977), that same album features "Frankie's First Affair" of which the Mole Blunt was keen on dancing to (69). Chance in his turns tells Joel that he and the Mole Blunt have a clique in Biarritz calling themselves "the B-Team" (1987: 159), in an obvious pun to the *A-Team*, which began broadcasting in 1983. In Biarritz too, the Japanese businessman Hideo Nagoya is said to be running to the water "only slightly more slowly than Carl Lewis [...] at Los Angeles Olympics" (184), which took place in the summer of 1984. When Joel and the Mole Blunt arrived at Biarritz, the town is expected to be the first to be connected to a state-of-the art cybernetic network by the end of the summer (157-158). This system can be guessed to be the Minitel, a proto-internet available only at a national level in France, being Biarritz the chosen place where to start it (Gayan, 1983: 103) on 11th September 1984. To get it in operation, the local electric supply has to be switched off (1987: 185, 190), something which meets the climax of the novel. One of the things Joel does when he returns home, is to help his son Benjamin with an Amstrad instruction book (198), being Amstrad's first PC model, CPC 464, released in April 1984. Besides, Chance lets Joel know that he intends to include "Steph of Monaco" (195), who only became of age in 1983, among the cast of the film he is shooting. The music used at Donna's school show is said to owe very much to *Chariots of Fire* (198), released in 1981. At the end, during a last party the Falklands War Factor (205) is spoken about, depicting the moment of renewed national pride that swiped England after the victory in 1982.

Brrm! Brrm!, published in 1991, deals with the cultural shocks of a young Japanese man, Akira Suzuki, posted in London as he interacts with the English. This novel is clearly taking place throughout 1987, being the action mainly in autumn. Among the four, it is precisely this one in which the time setting is most obvious, which is seen in the following traces.

As Suzuki gets private English language and culture from journalist Ted Rochester, it is stated that from Rochester's flat one can see "a tower said TELECOM" (1991: 39), it is Telecom Tower, now BT Tower as the company changed its name in 1991. Meanwhile, Suzuki's love infatuation Jane Austen Ormond has her articles poorly-paid because there are a lot of youth magazines like "*Face*, *Blitz*, *ID* and *Arena* [...]" covered the same few subjects at once" (29). It happens that among these "acne mags" (38), as jocularly called by Ted Rochester, the last one was founded in 1986, whereas the second ended publication in 1991. In a gym, Suzuki befriends Lionel, a boxer and broker, who is always making jokes about *Endurance*, a Japanese show having some extracts broadcast on English television commented by an Australian host (54). Obviously, it is Clive James himself in his probably most well-known programme *Clive James on Television*, broadcast from 1982 to January 1988 that used a pioneer technique of featuring snippets from other programmes including the afore-mentioned Nipponese one (2010: 16-17, 20-21, 90-91, 115), which began broadcasting in 1984. Suzuki is

also very keen on theatre. Among the plays he attends there is a new modern one in the National Theatre about economic “decline” (1991: 82). The only play performed which fulfils these characteristics is Alan Ayckbourn’s *A Small Family Business*, which was precisely premiered at the National Theatre on 20th May 1987. Later on, one evening Suzuki and Jane went to Lionel’s flat warming party “by means of the new Docklands Light Railway” (98), which was inaugurated in August 1987. But the most identifying fact is that “On the day after Lionel’s flat warming party the stock market crashed” (109). This economic calamity is no other than the ’87 Crash, which took place on 19th October 1987 (Hawkins, 1991: 1726). After an incident in a disco, a police woman tells Suzuki that “watching ‘The Bill’” (James, 1991: 127), a series that started broadcasting in 1984, is what makes the inspector interrogate him with so much jargon. Furthermore, Waldemar Januszczak, who in the novel is characterised as BBC presenter Wladislaw Janulowiczescu (145), left BBC2 for Channel 4 in 1989. During Suzuki’s last visit, Ted Rochester tells him about meeting Duke Hussey and his wife at a BBC’s dinner (153-154), being Duke Hussey BBC’s chairman from 1986 to 1996. It is also remarkable that nothing happening between 1988 and 1991 is mentioned at all, notoriously neither the fall of Berlin’s Wall nor the Gulf War.

Published in 1996, *The Silver Castle* is the story of Sanjay, a street kid that becomes a Bollywood broken toy, keeping pace with the development of India’s New Economic Policy after being since independence a “government-controlled economy” (1997: 38) in the so-called Licence Raj. In contrast to the previous novels, it has a greater time span, taking place between 1989 and 1991, after some very few chapters dealing with Sanjay’s childhood and his teens.

Ted Rochester, who also appears here, states: “Thank God the [Berlin’s] Wall’s down” (93), this happening in November 1989 (Hawkins, 1991: 1726). Meanwhile, a friend of his asks about Dan Quayle (1997: 94), Vice-President with George HW Bush, whose mandate began in 1989. It is said indeed that Ted Rochester returns to England “At a time [...] before deregulation” (1997: 96), which was completed in 1991. Afterwards Sanjay begins to work for American correspondent Scott. He and his American friends talk about the fact that holdings outside the broadcasting world are buying out USA private television networks, a process that took part in the middle 80s. This results in CBS and NBC suppressing their news bureaus, unlike ABC (116-117). The remaining private network FOX, founded in late 1989, is not even mentioned at all. Afterwards, they switch the topic of the conversation into film stars. Despite the fact of being considered in a far lower level than his wife Demi Moore, Bruce “Willis could be huge” (118) as one has just to “Wait for *Die Hard*” (a 1988 film) to be enhanced in its success. Also “The woman who is really going to make it is Mary Elizabeth Mastrantonio” (118) without any mention of 1991 blockbuster *Robin Hood, Prince of Thieves*, while Brooke Shields will be an “enormous” star (119). In addition, *Shogun* (a 1989 film) has found a new talent in Bridget Fonda (119). Moreover, the top actresses are stated to be Kim Basinger, Nastassja Kinski and Isabella Rossellini (119). Besides, it is told that Polanski has just married a much younger wife (118-19), in fact, it happened in August 1989. It is told that while deregulation is “on the horizon but not quite arrived, the quota system was still so strict that hardly any American films” reach India (120), so Sanjay has no idea about whom they are talking. When Sanjay returns to Bollywood Film City as a guide to an Australian TV crew, a film is being shot starring Divya Bharti (140), a very young Bollywood actress who died in 1993. An important fact of the story is that it runs parallel to the showing up of different brands of fizzy drinks. It began with local ones, like Thumbs Up (11, 159), being offered to Sanjay as a child the first

time he went to Film City, or Limca (81) which was his greatest treat as a teenager to continue with the arrival and success of world-wide names. The Americans gave him cans of the exotic Coca-Cola, which was unavailable in India between 1977 and 1991. On Sanjay's first day at Bollywood as a stunt, he witnesses the putting up of a huge electric Pepsi billboard at the top of a tall building (156), being already crowned when he returns from work (164). This "talisman of deregulation" (156) is framed with the coming of Pepsi to India, which happened in 1988 to take over the market. As economic openness takes off, "the consumer markets expanded, the clothes and expensive toys favoured by famous young people [...] were all brought in" (150). Another interesting point is that Sushila, a Bollywood Old Glory who is introduced to Sanjay as he begins working at Bollywood (160), is based on Nutan Samarth, who died from breast cancer in 1991. In addition, a film director mentions *JFK* (released in 1991) as the worst film ever (194). Moreover, Sanjay enjoys watching MTV (223, 228) at his girlfriend Miranda's home. It happens that MTV Asia broadcast from 1991 to 1993, when it became Channel [V], with MTV India only started broadcasting by late 1996. The film critic interviewing Miranda mentions both *The Bonfire of the Vanities* (released in 1988) and *Alien Nation* (234) (released in 1987, curiously set in 1991). Miranda is very keen on being cast (235) in a future film project directed by producer Ismail Merchant. She refers to *In Custody*, which was released in 1993. Despite the mention of Hindu-Muslim riots (214), something that began in 1990, there is no reference to the terrorist attack that took place in Mumbai in early 1993. Sanjay and Miranda always sleep together after watching the daily episode of American soap opera *The Bold and the Beautiful* (235), which successfully started broadcasting in "the whole of India" (235) in 1991 with the advent of private television (Rogers, Singhal & Thombre, 2004: 442) becoming an instant social phenomenon there (443, 446-50). At the end, Miranda marries ruthless businessman Gupta (1997: 258). It happens that in 1991 Bollywood star Tina Munim, from whom Miranda is based, married Anil Ambani, one of the richest Indian businessmen and Gupta's real-life counterpart.

This essay wants to prove that it is possible to identify the time setting of a novel through lowbrow references as well as highbrow ones. This analysis hopes to highlight the capacity and creativity of unfairly less known writer Clive James (1939-2019).

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