

Dumb Luck

Tom Arnold

Byker Books

Published by:-

Byker Books
Banbury
Oxon
OX16 0DJ

www.bykerbooks.co.uk

2010

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A catalogue record of this title is available from The British
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ISBN 978-0-9560788-7-2

Typeset by Byker Books, Banbury

Printed in Great Britain by Lightning Source, Milton Keynes

Superb Cover by Jez Webb
(www.studiowebb.com)

Tom Arnold lives in Chester with his four year old son who thinks he's a T-Rex, a one year old bundle of mischief and his lovely Irish wife Sarah (she paid him to say that!) He works as a SAP Guru for a big oil company and every now and again when he's stuck on a rig or an oil tanker in a force nine gale he wonders if he might just prefer to be at home writing instead. In his spare time he mainly visits the zoo and changes nappies and in the remaining three seconds left after the boys go to bed he writes (recently completing his fourth novel - a post apocalyptic comedy, death, zombie fest!)

This is his first published novel.

Acknowledgements

First - I'd like to thank Byker Books for having the vision and guts to print something not containing a wizard or a vampire (although there is possibly a market to create a hybrid wizard/vampire/alien blockbuster in the near future). Byker Books are the Tony Wilson of the publishing industry and we need more of them. I don't know if that makes me Joy Division, New Order, the Happy Mondays or Bez's maracas - but it's a lot of fun right now. A true adventure.

And of course - a planet-sized thank you to Sarah, my amazing wife for all her support, advice and blunt critique. Every chapter - fresh off the press that day - went through the McGrane barometer. But most of all - thanks for her faith in the book and my writing and her never-ending determination and enthusiasm. To my parents who've never been judgemental about my writing (darkness is not everyone's cup of tea). To my little sis Sarah Alderson who's about to take the literary world by storm with her own work of genius (go sis! Ps if you get a film deal before me, can you put this in front of the director?) To 'Fatboy' aka Jez Webb - best man -best mate - Godfather to my kids and a man of great talent. Cheers for the artistic direction for the front cover dude! To the McGrane Massive - there's an army of rellies in Ireland who've been my most ardent supporters for years. Finally - out there somewhere (Dulwich probably) - is my old English Teacher Dr Piggott a true inspiration and one of the funniest and most intelligent people I've ever met. That sheer unadulterated exuberance has stuck with me ever since.

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Mean streets

Time's moved on and I'm on my way out. Three months of my life gone. But not forgotten. The shitstains of a thousand horrorshows are meshed and mashed and wiped all over my damaged psyche. On the outside I may be smiling but on the inside I'm crying. I keep this to myself. Stoic - that's me - stoic. Determined to survive and determined I'm gonna make something of my life. I'm gonna turn it all around and show those ignorant bastards what I'm made of.

Some part knows this is the kind of fighting talk you need to stand a chance back on the outside. I was only in for three months. But three months is more than enough for this kid. Still, the world's my lobster as my dear old Da' always says between pints of whisky. So long as I don't get in with a bad crowd again and stop spray-painting my cool-as graffiti all over our capital's train carriages I'll be alright. I guess.

I've got myself enrolled on a course - the government's gonna sponsor me - very nice of them. Smithy told me about this one. It seems too good to be true. But I checked it all out with the careers advisor and he pushed all the paperwork through for me. Nice one. Some sort of apprentice graphic artist at a big magazine publisher. They say I got talent. I also got a real big ability to screw things up royally. Honest, if something looks too good to be true - I usually cock it up. It's a gift. If there's a wrong place and a wrong time - I'll be there. Ever since I was a kid, the breaks never fell my way.

'Don't fuck this up now Michael - you've been given a chance - now take it,' the warden advised as he gave me my leaving pep talk.

'No sir, I won't, I won't fuck it up,' and even while I said it, all I could think was, Shit, I'm gonna fuck it up, I always do.

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But I smiled at him and he seemed happy enough with my response. Another lost soul redeemed for the good of society.

So one door shuts behind me and the whole world opens up before me. My blank canvas is back. I'm itching to get down to something - not sure what though. Maybe go out and find me a girl. I had a few girlfriends before I went in, but not half as many as I made up. If I told you I shagged twelve girls then divide by two and subtract four - and then you're a bit closer to the truth. And with the women it's the exact reverse - whatever they tell you when they're acting all coy and innocent - well just times whatever figure they tell you by two and add four. No shit - it works - I reckon - though no-one's ever really gonna tell you, not really - everyone needs some private secret shit.

So I'm walking down the street now feeling a bit jittery about everything and overawed by the whole being outside thing when I decide to go home and get it over and done with. I notice there are more silver cars on the streets than when I went inside. Wonder why? I quite like it though - makes everything sparkle in the gay, bright, afternoon sun. I like thinking of the sun being so gay and bright - on the inside it was the kinda word to scare the shit out of you, 'you gay or what?' Bang! Black. All black. But out here I like to reclaim the word 'cos I can. I stop all of a sudden in the middle of the pavement. My head throbs - throbs and threatens to burst with the pain. A wave of searing, stabbing intensity smashes through my brain and then it's gone. It's taken two months to get this far - so the pain only comes in small flashes every few days now - but the memories - some of them are still a bit hazy - 'specially my new ones. Maybe it's for the best - that's what the warden told me - advised me - if I wanted to get out...

The trees in inner city London look as grey and drab and desperate as they ever have. And the people trudge past me effing and blinding and eyeballing and squaring up. Some twelve-year-old punk arse kid in the freakiest looking silver tracksuit I've ever seen comes striding up past me, rapping and touretting to himself. All spitting and arms flailing and

mumbling some dumb-arsed lyrics he doesn't understand by some hip hop artist who must've struck it big whilst I was in...whilst I was in there - in that place.

I get on the train. Now that's funny. Most things improve while you're away. You go on holiday and a new shop opens up or a Nando's has sprung up on the corner. But the trains - they just seem to be acting in reverse to the rest of the known physical universe. I swear it - we need a train Tsar. Some all-powerful train guru who can kick some butt and make it into something that actually works - even just a little bit. I 'spose I tried in my own little way to corrupt all this. But I did it as a relief valve - a way for me to escape the insanity of my existence. And my stuff was great - it is great - I'm pretty damned talented if you didn't know. Even the Magistrate said so - and my Ma' - when she saw my work up in court the final time - sample evidence photograph D was her favourite.

Anyway, I get on the train and notice the ripped up blue chequered seats and the stink of human shit and piss all over the carriage. What the hell's the point in putting a toilet on these things when they just service animals on these lines? And we were going into the heart of the savage darkness where all was wild and shitty and the closest you got to hope was taking the first letter away and going back four. I liked listening to the Streets on the inside - now there's a boy who knows what it's all about. He helped take the in out of sane.

I get off the train and step over the needles that lay all about. Usually they clear all this shit up. They're trying man. They're trying real hard, but it's a battle. I notice one a couple of steps ahead of me and make a line for it and stamp down and crush. My knackered old retro trainers grind the vial 'til all is dust and I wonder if that made a difference - any difference. I also wonder if maybe it was one my old man had used - he's in and out of all that shit.

I eye the dealers at the corner and carry on past them - being sure to show them I have the glint of someone who's seen the inside of the inside. But not so much that they see right inside the souls of my eyes, give those mad muthafucka's

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that kind of a glare and you might as well bring along your own body bag and start zipping yourself up. The crazy kids round here been into killing and maiming people for a while now - they gotta protect their jobs somehow - and eventually we all follow the way of the gun.

I walk across the estate. It's really quite beautiful in a weird grey concrete nihilistic way. The bins next to the stairwell are overflowing with stinking piles of cack and crap. Do public services ever bulldoze their way this far into the jungle? I dunno - I wouldn't. I walk up the stairwell, careful to avoid the pools of stale urine and the smashed glass. I spot a shard of green glass - haven't seen a bottle like that for years. Looks like an old bottle of Turbo - my Da' used to drink that stuff.

'Feckin' lethal stuff boy!' Da' used to spit as he gulped great drainfuls of the stuff down his thin, reedy, scraggy neck. That was a few years ago now - he's gone further down-market since then - so I hear. I turn the stairs and see the door to my Ma's place is smashed in. The bare wooden door has taken a massive dent to the bottom and the glass in the upper half is hanging loose and shattered, swinging on the grey twisted wire that held it in place. My heart screams. Bile races up my throat - like sucking battery acid up. I run into a living hell and wanna vomit. My Da' is lying prostrate on the hall carpet - his neck gashed and open like a psycho butcher has had a go on him. Thick, caked blood pumps out of his head and neck and from an assortment of wounds all over his pathetic body.

'Oh shit - shitting fucking shit Dada - what have they done - they done to you????' I scream.

'They want you son,' he spurgles through bubbling frothing blood. And I know he's right - what I'd done was coming back to haunt me. They were gonna track me down - track my family down - hunt us all like we were some piddly little creatures just waiting our turn to be ripped up and spat out by some wild dog. And it was all my fault. I knew this now - and my life would never be the same again.

I cradle my Father's body for the few remaining seconds of life he has in him.

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'I don't wanna die son - wanna drink - another drink son - what they go and smash me up for - what I do son? Son?' and then he really panics and begins to clasp and struggle and rasp and piss himself and then I feel the last rasp of alcohol and blood-stained air limp out of his lungs and he's gone. All gone.

I take the open neck of the Turbo bottle out of his jugular, ignoring the blood-spurts as I do. The glint of the little orange price label taunting me - 'A.J. Patel - 99p.' The number sticks in my head. Was that all Da' was worth - 99 fuckin' p?

My jeans begin to stick and my legs to tremble so you couldn't get them to stop if you tied them together with anchor chains. The bottle's been buried in way deep - and there's a message - a message in the bottle. I pick up the raggedy crimson blood-caked letter - 'Don't send an SOS to the moon - we'll even find you there Michael - you think you got clean away - think again boy. The Equalizer.'

I wanna puke as I stare at Da' and think of the wisecracking message a cold-blooded killer has left me, but know I have to leave - now.

I run.

Fox on the run

I took the stairwell five at a time - leaping down the stairs so fast it was almost like I was flyin'. I wasn't sure what the hell I was doing or what I was gonna do. Half of me wanted to find this fucker - this fucker who had done this right now. Bring it all to a head and kill or be killed. But then my instincts took over and I was flying down stairs and sprinting across the estate - too scared to look back. Yeah, I was scared, who wouldn't be? I just found my Da' with a bottle rammed through his neck - I'd just seen him die in my arms.

I heard the pigs come racing up the road and screech to a halt outside my old home. If there's one thing you can rely on - it's the cops turning up way too late to do any good. That's why they missed me - I was long gone - outta sight. I slowed my sprint into a fast walk and tried to blend in with the general bunch of crap and scum who milled along the main road about me. The tears streaming down my bloodshot eyes and the dark crimson blood smeared copiously down my jeans and t-shirt probably foiled any attempt to truly blend in with my neighbourhood - but no-one was gonna ask me where I got so bloody. Common sense told you that. So people gave me funny looks and moved across the road and a few pointed at me but nobody called out for the cops. Call the cops...not likely mate - this ain't no Happy Mondays number. Anyway, step on it, I thought - and broke into a jog once more. Flyin' again, down Brixton tube taking the barrier at a running vault - steaming down the oil-starved, screeching escalators and diving straight into a waiting tube carriage.

I sat, panting and sweating.

I could hear a guard or someone yelling at the top of the

escalators. 'You can't travel without a ticket. You need a ticket!'

Fuck off! Fuck off! I thought. I was having a really, really shitty day. So shitty in fact that I was now beginning to feel my anger boil over like a latent hangover from the emotional headfuck of five minutes earlier. And now, as the door slapped shut and the tube rolled out of the station, I went mad.

DOOF...DOOOFF...DOOOOOOOFFFFFFFFFFF!!!!!!

I smashed and booted the carriage door as hard and desperately as I ever tried to break anything. I kicked and smashed and booted and smacked that door and imagined it was the head of my Father's murderer. I'm not really one for violence - honest - honest to God - but sometimes there's just no other way to release it - to release that pain. And it was a self-inflictive sort of violence - I was only turning it all against myself. I knew that it would be me with the bust foot and the toe all black and blue and the nail bloody and hanging off this evening. But then again, I never seen anyone murdered in front of my eyes before. Well - maybe I had.

I kicked harder as a dark thought tried to surface. I kicked it down - hard in the head and then I kicked again. Truth to tell I was quite impressed with the build-quality on the Victoria line. I hadn't really expected the door to take such a constant and sustained attack - but I 'spose in the seventies these things had to withstand shitloads of spikey-haired punks running headlong into them after a night watching the latest crusty punk fuck-ups. And DM's packed a lot more welly than my puny trainers. My Da' told me he'd been into that scene a little when he was a kid. Said he was a big Clash fan - and the Undertones they were his favourite. Teenage Kicks eh? I laughed out loud. The thought jolted me out of my destruction therapy. A good Irish lad was sure to be an Undertones fan - and the Boomtown Rats - he loved Sir Bob, too, even if he got a bit over-friendly with the old enemy the English. Turning up to the Queen's house an' all to get a knighthood. Still - it pissed Da' off even more when his only son began to 'talk like one of dem - listen to ya will ye? Ahhh it's a feckin' embarrassment so it is!' And then he would laugh and chuckle to himself

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and be off down the bookies to place another fucked-up bet on some sure-fire certainty that always fell at the first. But every now and again I remembered him stumbling back from the pub with a massive smile on his face and the words of some old rebel song falling out of his lips in lilting dribs and drabs. And on days like this I almost liked my pissed, useless heap-of-old-shit, good-for-nothing waster Da'. More than the pissed-up, rage-filled violent Da' I usually got. And Da' would always try to smuggle a bottle of cheap cider out of the offie nearby and pour some in his water or whatever he was drinking at dinner. And Ma' always went mental - screaming and wailing - really wailing - these great, heartfelt screaming sobs that terrified me more than a thousand Nazis running towards me with machine guns would or an army of flesh-eating zombie killer muthafuckas ever would. And now even my shitty pitiful memories of an excuse for a childhood were left in tatters. Even they had been yet further downtrodden into the shithole of memory. And the happy freeze-frame of my Da' grabbing me playfully by the scruff of the neck and hanging onto a bottle of cheap whisky with his free hand and announcing his intention to drink himself stupid 'cos of 'the day that's in it!' - even that battered old overused freeze-frame of a brief encounter - a brief moment of near happiness - at the touch of my Father - a touch of love and happiness - well that was all gone now - obliterated by the dark green of a bottle of cheap imported cider.

I escaped into north London, getting off at Finsbury Park and jumping the barriers again, all the time clutching the raggedy, blood-soaked message in my clenched fist and thinking things over. Probably woulda been better to keep that evidence with my Da's body - but it was too late for that now. Shit-for-brains Micky boy had fucked it up again.

I didn't really like it around here 'cos it wasn't home - but I had a few mates I could crash with. It was dark now, dark and cold for early April. I made my way over the road - past the Halal butchers and the kebab shops and the strange-smelling grocery stores that sold all sorts of meat and veg I'd never got used to seeing in the centre of London.

The smells, the spices, the exotic aromas reminded me of one of the only holidays I ever had. A week in Tunisia, of all places. Ninety nine quid for me and my Ma'. Da' was long gone, holidaying on park benches and pub floors by then. I remember being so bewitched by the smells and their crazy bustling chaotic markets and the bartering and the cajoling and the life. The life - it seemed to pump through everyone - as if there was a world worth living and fighting and cheating for. One that I could only dare dream of in London. I remember all the cows' heads and body bits lying about in the wicked heat and the flies crawling all over them - and then some haggard looking Yoda-crony would hobble over and feel the meat all over and haggle for a bit, pay and wander off with dinner dripping with blood and flies in a little blue plastic bag way too thin to hold a cow's head in.

I stumbled past the mosque, the one the Muslim guy with the claw hand came from - lost in my sad holiday thoughts and for the first time since all this crazy murdering shit had happened I wondered where the hell my Mother was. Shit - I'd forgotten to check out the rest of the flat. Surely to God she wasn't in there as well? It had been surprise enough to see Da' back at our place, but to find him there and dead and my Ma' not - well that was just plain weird. Then again - Ma' always had more luck - and more of a sixth sense about danger and stuff like that. She was all right for now - I was sure.

I wandered up the steps of the old dilapidated house. It was a monstrous building - someone's lush mansion a hundred years ago I guessed - but now it was split up into tiny, tiny, tiny separate little rooms for people to live their puny, puny little lives in. My mate Rezza opened the peeling, bashed-up old front door eventually and we walked up the stairs to his bedsit in silence. Once we got inside he opened up.

'What the fuck happened to you man - Jesus fuckin' hell man - you look a right state!'

'You skinning up or what,' I asked as I slumped onto his beaten-up old sofa.