

THE CONSTANT PAST

SEAN MCMULLEN

Award winning author SEAN McMULLEN gained a major reputation for his scientifically accurate 'hard' science fiction with his epic Greatwinter series, which includes *Souls In the Great Machine*, *The Miocene Arrow*, and *Eyes of the Calculator*. *The Miocene Arrow* won an Aurealis Award for Science Fiction, as did his earlier novel *The Centurion's Empire*. With his Moonworlds series (*Voyage of the Shadowmoon*, *Glass Dragons*, *Voidfarer*, and *The Time Engine*), McMullen has firmly established himself as a fantasy author. In a review of *Glass Dragons*, *Booklist* wrote: 'McMullen has a gift worthy of the best mainstream authors for creating memorable, finely nuanced characters, making him must-reading for fantasy enthusiasts weary of the routine sword-and-sorcery outings.'

Although his Moonworlds fantasy novels have been translated into many languages and spread his reputation across Europe, his last three awards have all been for science fiction stories — 'Tower of Wings', 'Walk to the Full Moon', and 'Voice of Steel'. Even his Greatwinter science fiction series unfolded a little more in 2007 with the publication of his story 'Schwarzdrache' ('Dragon Black') in Germany. Television options have been bought for several of his stories. His short fiction can be found in magazines such as *Analog*, *Interzone*, *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*, *Universe*, *Aurealis*, and *Eidolon*.

Sean is also an expert in the history of Australian science fiction and has won four William Atheling Jr Awards for excellence in science fiction criticism. He was an assistant editor of *The Melbourne University Press Encyclopedia of Australian Science Fiction & Fantasy* and author (with Russell Blackford and Van Ikin) of *Strange Constellations: A History of Australian Science Fiction*. He also manages to work full time as a computer systems analyst, teach karate (he has a black belt), and work on his PhD in Medieval Fantasy Literature at the University of Melbourne.

'The Constant Past' has all the ingredients of a fine mystery story... murder, obsession, love, death, desire, and poetry. Oh, yes, and an added ingredient: time travel...

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Mister Brandel did try to blend in with the fashions of the London of 2010, but only in the sense that he played down the more strident aspects of his own time's fashions. He wore a heavy, calf-length garric overcoat, and it was such a dark shade of green that when I first met him I took it for black. This he kept buttoned all the time, and it reached down to a pair of black, fringed, knee-length boots. Although he wore a cadogan wig, which did tend to stand out, his black beaver hat was worn pulled down very low, so that the wig was almost lost between the hat and the collar of his coat. In his right hand was a Malacca cane, while in his left he held a well-worn leather folder filled with papers.

What intrigued me from the start was that he did not make a point of seeming from the late eighteenth century. A serious re-enactment fanatic would have used a quill and jar of ink, but Mister Brandel had found a ballpoint pen somewhere and was happy to use this for his writing. He did not write very much, but that which he did write was in an elegant script, and was mainly names, dates, places, and descriptions. He did read a great deal, however, and it was always the biographies of Elizabeth Crossen, the nineteenth-century poet. As a librarian I have noticed that most readers show little emotion as they read, but Mister Brandel generally scowled. For someone with such an interest in Crossen, he never seemed at all happy to be reading about her.

Mister Brandel never became a borrower, and this struck me as odd. Borrowing was far more convenient than playing book roulette with other library customers. As a former forensics professional, this also told me that he might have an identity to hide. Some of the staff were running a competition to find out both who he was and who he was pretending to be. On the evening that I learned both his name and his alias, he had been visiting the library on and off for seven months. As usual, he had gone to the shelves in search of the Crossen biographies, then come to the information desk.

'Your pardon, the books about Elizabeth Crossen are missing,' he said.

'Do you mean the biographies?' I asked.

'Yes, yes. There were five of them.'

'Just a moment.'

I checked our holdings. All five books were on loan.

'They have been borrowed, all at the same time and by the same person,' I explained. 'Some student writing an essay about her, I'd say. We can reserve them for you.'

'Reserve them?'

'Yes. When they are returned, I'll send you a message. What is your address?'

'My address,' he sighed. 'I — I travel.'

'Well, do you have email?'

'Ah, no.'

'What about a phone number?'

'I have no phone number address. Sir, were I to come here in three weeks, will the books be, ah, reserved as you say?'

'Well yes, but they might be returned early.'

'But you said they were on loan for three weeks.'

'Most books are returned before they are due.'

Mister Brandel looked both weary and exasperated, as if even something as simple as a library loan was too much for him to comprehend. He knew just enough of the system to find the biographies of Elizabeth Crossen, and had no interest in learning any more.

'If I return in three weeks, will the books be here for me to read?'

There was something subtly dangerous about the man's attitude. In another career, almost in another life, I had worked in a police laboratory. I know the signs to look for, and Mister Brandel had them. In theory he had to be a member of the library to have books reserved in his name, but by now I was more than intrigued by him.

'Return three weeks from today, the books will be here,' I answered.

This was all that he wanted to hear, and his manner softened at once.

'So much ... everything ... it is such a strain,' he said wearily, as if

almost beyond words. 'My thanks, you do ease my path.'

'That is what I'm paid to do,' I said cheerily. 'What name shall I put against them?'

'Goldsmith. James Goldsmith.'

With that he turned away, strode for the doors, and vanished into the night. Upon the reference desk was his leather folder, battered with use and greasy with handling. I picked it up, suspecting that a man like him would be back soon. Very soon he was indeed back, looking flushed and wild-eyed.

'Is this yours?' I called, holding his folder up.

Our strangest customer came hurrying over and snatched it from my hand.

'Yes, yes, praise all saints, I thought it lost,' he babbled in relief.

'You were lucky you left it on my desk,' I said casually. 'Try not to leave anything valuable lying about, the library is full of thieves.'

'Indeed, is it so?' he said, his relief still apparent. 'My thanks for your warning.'

With that he gave me a curt bow, then hurried from the library again. Having a background in forensics I tend to pick up odd details about people, and Mister Brandel had just confirmed my suspicions about being a little out of the ordinary. Within the space of a minute he had grown at least two days of beard stubble.

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It was not a busy night, so I plugged my phone into a USB port on the reference desk computer and accessed the image store. Mister Brandel had been separated from his leather folder for a little more than three minutes, yet this had been enough for me to use my phone to take twelve double page photographs of the notes he had made.

His real name, Edwin Charles Brandel, was on the inside of the folder. He was meticulous and methodical in his studies, particularly about dates. On the first page he stated the date to be 15th April 2010, and noted the name of Colonel Graham Harridane. Quite a lot of details were noted down about this man, including his first meeting with Elizabeth Crossen. This was

on the 23rd of November 1803. Following this was the cryptic 'marr. 3 May 1805'.

I looked up Colonel Harridane on an online genealogical database. He had been shot and killed in a duel on 25th November 1803. On the second page was an undated 'Vale' with a line drawn under it. I looked up 'Vale'. It was Latin for goodbye. Next came an entry for Sir Gregory Cottington, noting that an introduction to Elizabeth Crossen had been arranged for 30th November 1805. Again there were details of addresses, dates of concerts, and even the names of brothels that the knight had been known to visit. Eerily, 'marr.' again appeared, now dated 16th March 1805, and again followed by 'Vale.'

As I accessed another website dealing with Crossen, I already suspected that I would find an entry about an untimely death. Sure enough, Sir Gregory had been stabbed to death in the company of a prostitute the very next night after meeting with the poet. The woman had been hanged for his murder, and Crossen had even commented on the matter in a letter to her sister.

'Sir Gregory has been murdered in the most scandalous of circumstances. He was found dead in the company of a common woman. And to think, he was in this very house just the day before. He was courting me, no less.'

I scanned the remaining pages of Mister Brandel's notes. There were details of fifteen men who, to use the terminology of the time, were men of quality. All but one had died violently, within a few days of their first meeting with Elizabeth Crossen. The single exception had an entry on the very last page, and his name was Robert Bell. The name was familiar, but I could not quite place it. Unlike most librarians, I have little background in the arts and literature. Networks and databases are my areas. Give me a reference or a name and I can track it down, but without a reason to do the search I am lost.

Now I did a combined search on Robert Bell and Elizabeth Crossen. Bell was an early romantic poet of no particular talent, and the sample of his works that I glanced over involved medieval knights and ladies meeting after long separations, then marrying and living contentedly. Crossen had met him in 1809, and they had indeed married the following year and gone on to live happily for several decades.

The records of the Old Bailey are on the web, and it took only moments to call up the murder of Sir Gregory Cottington. A prostitute

named Gwen Bisley had been convicted of the crime, but were modern forensics in use at the time she might have walked free. That was my opinion, anyway. She testified that she had entertained a very strange gentleman in her room by merely taking her clothes off. He had paid her and left, then she had gone in search of her next client. When she had returned with him, a man was lying 'stabbed, dead and naked' on her bed. The client ran screaming, raising a hue and cry. The authorities found Gwen's bully drunk in a nearby tavern. The magistrate concluded that the pair had conspired to murder Sir Gregory, but that the bully had got 'too far into drink' with the money stolen from him, and had forgotten to dispose of the body.

I re-read the description that Gwen had given of her first client. He had worn a dark beaver hat whose brim shadowed his face, but she was sure that he had been wearing a wig. All else was concealed by his coat, but his voice had been that of a 'Frenchy', as she had put it. Apart from the accent, that was Mister Brandel's description, and even I could fake a French accent.

By then it was getting near closing time, so I checked out several anthologies of early nineteenth century poetry to myself. Returning home on the Underground, I discovered that Elizabeth Crossen was not best known as an early romantic poet, but a pioneer of the Gothic style. In the years leading up to 1809 her works grew increasingly dark in tone, and she often wrote of being 'courted by death'. Anthology introductions spoke of her suitors having an extraordinarily high mortality rate, but her marriage to Robert Bell had given her a last chance for happiness. With Robert she had been lucky. He was mentioned as being from a noble family, but working as an assistant to a magistrate 'for the common goode.' He had abandoned this career for his poetry after marrying Elizabeth.

I was so intrigued that I not only missed my station, I missed it by eight stops.

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The following morning saw me in the British Library's reading rooms at St Pancras, and by lunchtime I was in the nearby bookshops. I arrived at the municipal library with my own copies of all five biographies of Elizabeth Crossen, along with several books of her poetry. I had even memorised her most famous work, 'Death is a Gentleman in Love'. The poem described a shadowy figure that stalked her in the shadows, jealously taking the lives of anyone bold enough to court her.

Literary authorities were unanimous that this was her finest work, and some Gothic scholars even lamented the beginning of her liaison with Bell because it brightened her mood. Others argued that she had done more good with her later pastoral works, because she had gone on to promote the glories of the English countryside at a time when it was under threat from industrialisation. I found myself even developing an empathy for Bell as well as his wife. After all, we were both refugees from law enforcement.

Those who have not worked in forensics can never appreciate how very attuned one becomes to a case. Every detail becomes worthy of investigation, because important clues can never be anticipated. Thus it was that I decided to review the security tapes from the cameras in the library. There were several cameras, all feeding into old-style video cassette tapes, and these were rotated every three days. I had hoped to catch a good view of Mister Brandel, in particular his face. I was disappointed. He appeared on only two tapes, because all other cameras had been moved to the hidden corners of the book stacks. At that time we were trying to catch the Phantom Crapper, who was touring the municipal libraries of London and leaving steaming hot turds in secluded areas.

In a strange way I was very relieved to see Mister Brandel on the tape of the information desk, because it confirmed him to be real. Everything was as I remembered it, however, and I learned nothing. On the tape from the library entrance he appeared four times. These were images of him that I had not seen, so even though they did not provide a better view of his face, I stared at them intently. I could even see myself sitting at the information desk in the background, for the camera was trained on people leaving the library. This was to catch customers leaving with stolen goods. I saw Mister Brandel collecting his folder from me, then approaching the camera. The inner glass doors slid aside, he walked through ... and I remained dimly visible as he passed between me and the camera!

Several dozen viewings later I had established that the library's most intriguing borrower had started fading as he had passed through the inner doors. Were he really from the first decade of the nineteenth century, he would not know about cameras. Amid everything that did not make sense, here was consistency at last.

For the rest of that evening I studied trends in clothing from around 1800. It was a time of transition for men's fashions in England, influenced heavily by George Brummel. Being a favourite of the Prince Regent, Brummel's opinions were taken seriously. He had established trends to personal hygiene, wearing clean clothes, and the abandoning of wigs and hair powder for more natural grooming. In general, the lighter colours of the

late eighteenth century were giving way to dark green, sombre brown, and even black. Mister Brandel's wig and beaver hat were a little old fashioned for the early 1800s, but his long, dark garrick overcoat with its high collar was certainly in period. Slowly I established a profile for him. He was not overly conscious of fashion, and even lagged a little behind in some matters of style, but generally he made an effort to blend in. He did not have a stale, unwashed reek about him, which fitted in with Brummel's decrees on washing being fashionable.

It was while having dinner that I realised Mister Brandel was a serial killer.

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For the next week I resented every reference enquiry from every library customer as I researched Mister Brandel and everything associated with him. Edwin Charles Brandel had worked for the East India Company, although his occupation was merely given as 'agent'. The scanty records about him showed that he had been in India in the 1780s and 90s, and had returned to England a rich man. This would have put his age at no less than forty when he had begun his peculiar, anonymous association with Elizabeth Crossen in 1803. She had been seventeen then.

Mister Brandel's father had been knighted for his part in the British Admiralty's project to develop highly accurate clocks to help ships' navigators calculate longitude. His brother William had taught natural philosophy at Oxford University. William's single published paper was on the mathematics of time. In it he argued how time was really a branch of optics, and could be intensified, reflected back upon itself, and even focussed into the future. The paper had been published as a monograph in 1792, and William had died in 1803. No indication was given of what he had discovered or developed in his last eleven years. Edwin Brandel had returned from India in the year of his death.

The more I learned, the more fearful I became. Mister Brandel was a rich man from an upper class military family, and his brother had made studies into the nature of time and optics that were wildly at odds with both contemporary and subsequent scientific theory. After his brother had died, Mister Brandel became obsessed with a pretty, intelligent and vivacious young woman less than half his age. There was evidence for his involvement in the murders of fourteen of her suitors between 1803 and 1809.

What can one do about a serial killer from two hundred years in the

past who is researching his victims in one's library? My work in forensics had been with associative evidence, that is, trawling databases and finding links between apparently unrelated facts. I was sure of myself... yet the police would be sure to treat my suspicions as a joke. Even if they did take me seriously, I doubted that they could do anything about Mister Brandel. He could vanish at will, and apparently he could also travel through time. By the look of his notes, he had done quite a lot of research in other libraries. Why was he now in mine? Had he murdered other librarians for becoming too suspicious? I was not a man of action. I had never fired a gun, I did not jog, I did not have so much as a yellow belt in karate. Whatever I did would have to be alone, and it could certainly not involve a confrontation.

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I began to steal odd items on visits to other libraries, and after years of shunning the use of computers at home I bought my first PC, printer and scanner. Most significantly, I arranged lunch with my friend Harriet, who was a failed writer who refused to stop writing. It was usually Harriet who contacted me about our occasional dates, but now I needed her. She was not so much my ally against Mister Brandel, she was more of a weapon.

Harriet had a private income, so she was able to indulge her passion for writing detective fiction. Her style would have been acceptable in the 1930s, so had she been writing eighty years earlier she might have made a name for herself. This was 2010, however, so she was let down by her overblown prose, simple plots, minimal grasp of police procedures, and characters with about as much depth as a car park puddle. Nevertheless she had nine books in print, which had sold three or four hundred copies each. Out of loyalty I had bought copies of all nine, then bought another set which I had donated to my library.

'Look, it's the same old story,' said Harriet when I enquired about how her sales were coming along. 'Getting in print, easy peasey, you can go from formatted file to book-in-hand in a working week if you know who and how. Promotion? Hey, I do all the FM local shows and writers' centres, so people know. After that you have three problems. People know about the book, they want to buy the book, but now it's distribution, distribution, distribution.'

'So, the distributors still won't distribute?' I asked.

'Not even if I pay, and I've offered to do that.'

'I bet that doesn't stop you.'

‘Stop me? Hah! Since I’ve been selling directly from my web site, sales have gone up fifteen percent. That’s still only sixty two books more, but I’ve used another trick to get sales over five hundred — sort of.’

‘Really?’

‘It’s a bit of a fiddle, but it works. I do a scooter tour of all the big bookshops with remainder tables, taking a couple of copies of my latest into each place. I pretend to look through what’s on offer, leave my books on the table, and when I go nobody notices that I’ve got two less books than I came in with.’

‘You smuggle your books into bookshops?’

‘Hey, why not? When the system screws you then it’s time to screw the system.’

Harriet was as predictable as the sunrise, at least to someone from forensics. The word ‘screw’ had been spoken. That was highly significant, and meant she was in the mood.

‘So, how is the next book going?’ I asked. ‘Do you think number ten will score a thousand copies sold?’

‘Oh man, as if. How I would love to say “sales in four figures”. Er, speaking of the next book, would you like to be in a little research project?’

‘I’ll do what I can, the library’s resources are at your disposal.’

‘Er, well, it’s actually a bit more hands on than that.’

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That night after work I knocked at Harriet’s door at 11pm, and was greeted by a woman in a dark blue skirt suit with padded shoulders, wearing a beret, and with the most luridly crimson lipstick that I have ever set eyes upon.

‘Harriet?’

‘Hey, come in, come in, it’s 1945 and I’m a spy, wouldn’t you know it?’

Harriet was researching a seduction scene in which she was a spy and I was a British scientist with secrets that she wanted. Neither of us

smoked, so naturally when we lit up the first cigarettes to enter her unit in decades, her smoke detector went off and we both had coughing fits. To give her credit, she had researched the dinner, drinks and clothing of 1945 very thoroughly. I was sent into her bathroom to change into underwear that even my grandfather would have thought a bit dated, and over all this went a genuine 1945 shirt, tie and suit. I emerged feeling very self-conscious.

I am not entirely sure what Harriet got out of the encounter. Once drinks, dinner and banter were over, we both had quite a lot of trouble coping with a seduction that involved suspenders, braces, a fly with buttons, and all the other intricacies of archaic underwear. I tried to point out that real 1945 characters would have handled all that with the ease of experience, but Harriet did not agree. She maintained that the British scientist was meant to be inexperienced with removing female clothing.

We moved on to the act of lovemaking while partially clothed in 1945 fashions. This got off to a bad start when Harriet was hit in the face by my braces, then took a turn for the worse when one of my fly buttons got caught in a suspender strap. About three hours after I had arrived, we were at last fully divested of the clothing of 1945, seduced several time over, and drifting away to sleep.

Although my wife was by now nine years dead, and although this had not been my first experience of Harriet's literary researches, I still felt unease at being with someone else. Over and over I told myself that Emily was dead, and that this particular exercise was to save another life. Emily had been a policewoman, she had died in a shootout, and there was nothing that I could have done. We all have to fight in our own ways and with our own weapons, and this was my way of defending the innocent and defeating darkness. Sleep claimed me while I argued with my conscience.

It was the following morning that I had really come for. I did not start work until the mid-afternoon, and Harriet did not work at all. Thus I had roughly six hours free to spend with her.

'Harriet, I wonder if you would help me with a little project of my own?' I asked as we sat drinking coffee to the sound of London commuting to work outside.

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Mister Brandel arrived in the library at three weeks to the very minute from our previous meeting. Instead of going to the stacks he came straight to the reference desk. I cannot describe his manner as nervous, so much as brisk

and confident. Yes, his clothing was two hundred years out of date, but his manner made up for that. Look as if you belong, act as if your presence is beyond challenge, and everyone but a trained security guard will accept even a substantial degree of strangeness in your clothes.

‘Three weeks have passed, I must have my reserved books,’ he said, as if he had only left the library moments earlier.

I looked up at him, hoping that my smile did not look too forced. I very nearly called him Mister Brandel, but caught myself in time.

‘Mister Goldsmith, I have your biographies of Elizabeth Crossen, but I’m afraid there was a problem,’ I explained.

‘You have my books but there was a problem?’ he asked, frowning.

‘I had to get them in from Nunhead on inter-library loan. The student who borrowed our own copies has not returned them as yet.’

‘You — but you *do* have the books?’

‘Oh yes, I knew you have a keen interest in Elizabeth Crossen’s life, and I noticed that your time here seems to be limited, so I did not want you to be disappointed. I had them sent here only an hour ago. They are the latest editions.’

I could see the relief in Mister Brandel’s face, even though not much of his face was actually visible.

‘That is very kind of you,’ he whispered. ‘Such kindness is all too rare.’

Pausing only to check that the books were the same titles that he wanted, he hurried over to the reading tables, opened his folder, laid his pen across it, and picked up the first book.

Sweat trickled from my armpits and ran down my rib cage. The man was a killer, quite possibly he had been an assassin for the East India Company. He could travel through time, meaning that he could move about at will and kill with impunity, whether in the nineteenth or twenty- first centuries. He was clearly obsessed with Elizabeth Crossen, and by now I was able to guess at his agenda. A time machine cannot make you young again, but it can allow you to travel to a time when your much younger beloved is closer to your own age. The only problem would be if she happened to marry someone in the meantime, but there were ways to deal

with that as well.

Mister Brandel had conducted his strange courtship for six years now, and history had changed fourteen times as he assassinated his rivals. Two hundred years into his future, he had safely researched the details of the men that Elizabeth had married, then gone back and killed them. With each murder he changed history, clearing the way for yet another young rival. How long would this go on? He would probably spend only a few days or weeks in any year, so that Elizabeth would get older while his age virtually stood still. So far the age gap between them had narrowed by six years. What gap would he think to be suitable?

The man's problem was that he was in love with the *young* Elizabeth. We all change with the experience of life, however. When Emily had been shot I had very nearly been destroyed. I had not dated anyone for seven years, and I had changed both job and career to escape the memories of losing her. When I was young I would never have dreamed of dating someone like Harriet, yet she was such a contrast with Emily that I was now willing to have at least a tenuous attachment with her. If our relationship was a farce, what was wrong with a farce? I needed a laugh, after all. For her part, Harriet was tired of men who wanted her to adjust to their expectations. Because I did not make demands upon her or try to keep her from her lovingly, if shoddily, written detective fiction, she chose to include me as a small part of her life.

It took all of my willpower not to stare at Mister Brandel. He now had three books lying open on the reading table, and had just picked up a fourth. My past, it was coming to life. I had testified in court, dangerous people had learned just who had traced their guilt through convoluted database associations. Weeks later two hard, cold men had walked into the park where Emily and I were sitting, feeding the pigeons in the sunlight. I had been helpless, but she was an armed policewoman.

'Got any more crumbs for the birds?'

They had been my last words to her before we saw the guns come out.

'Run! I'll cover!'

They had been her last words to me. I ran, crouching low. Nine shots barked out behind me, and by the time I looked back there were three bodies on the ground and a lot of onlookers screaming and fleeing.

Now it was I who was doing the defending. I had fired my shots, I had not run, but I still had to stand my ground. Mister Brandel was a killer. *A killer from any other age still kills as dead.* The thought almost made me laugh, but I could not afford to laugh. At some time in the distant past, and with a trail of dozens of corpses behind him, Mister Brandel would finally court and win an Elizabeth Crossen who was perhaps four decades old. She would be bitter from the twenty years of pain and loss caused by his murders. He would be disappointed with what she had become after so much waiting and effort. He would be a disappointed killer.

Out of the corner of my eye I saw Mister Brandel stand, straighten his coat, then walk from the reading table.

'Oh Mister Goldsmith, you forgot your folder!' I called as loudly as is proper in a library.

He stopped and turned. His eyes wandered here and there, as if he were confused about who might have spoken to him.

'I am just to the privy, watch over my effects if you will,' he said to me at last, then continued on his way.

Glancing to the reading table, I saw that all five books I had given him now lay open. There was a muffled thump from somewhere, like the sound of a motor accident in the distance. I returned to my work on some inane reference question from the local historical society. A smoke detector called its shrill warning from nearby. I looked up.

'Someone smoking in the men's toilets,' said one of the shelvers.

'Again,' I replied.

I got to my feet with the usual reluctance. Ejecting smokers from the toilets always involved a confrontation. Ejecting Mister Brandel for smoking was bound to be even more of a challenge. Still, I was not surprised that he needed a smoke to steady his nerves after what I had done to him. I expected him to have one of those long-stemmed clay pipes, the sort that you can still find fragments of beside the Thames. As I approached the outer door I realised that something was wrong, however. There was the smell of sulphur on the air.

I had never dreamed how much smoke could be produced by a single gunshot. Mister Brandel was lying on the floor, on his back. His wig had landed in a urinal, and I now saw that his head was shaved. There was

a neat hole, blackened at the edges, in his right temple. The exit wound took up most of the left side of his skull. In his right hand was a flintlock pistol, its barrel still smoking, and in his left was his beaver hat. The ball had continued on to shatter a mirror.

I was the first aid officer for the evening shift, but this was well beyond my training or experience. Workplace First Aid 2.1 does not prepare students for someone blowing his brains out with a half inch lead ball. I forced myself to go down on one knee and put my fingers to the body's neck. The skin was warm, but there was no pulse. I stood, touching nothing, then recorded the scene with my phone camera.

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The library was closed as a crime scene while the police and coroner did their investigations. Mister Brandel immediately became a source of considerable mystery to them. He had no identity whatsoever, aside from what was in the folder. In the weeks that followed the police found no match with his DNA, and no match on his key facial elements. The Costume Suicide Man, as he came to be known, was featured on the television news and even spawned a few websites.

When the police first arrived I was quizzed about what books he wanted. Because he had borrowed nothing, he had needed no library card — and thus had not needed to show any ID. Only my memory contained a record of his requests.

'Why would history drive him to suicide?' asked the detective as I showed him the books that the dead man had been reading.

'I can't say. He seemed as if he wanted to live in the past, like with all his period clothing.'

'Oh yeah, it's amazing how he got the costume, the weapon, everything, so accurate. Like I study this sort of thing for a hobby, you know, I'm into historical re-enactment. That body in the gents is authentic, right down to the tooth decay. Even his costume has the sort of wear that only comes with years of use. My redcoat uniform is just like that, proper wear from years of use.'

'He had a particular interest in the poet Elizabeth Crossen,' I said, pointing out the five books that lay open alongside his leather folder.

'And apart from reading the books he never used any library

facilities?’

‘He never so much as reserved a book.’

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There had been chaos following the alarm being raised over Mister Brandel’s suicide. Very conscientiously I had removed the tapes for the monitor cameras that covered the information desk and front door, then locked them away for the police to examine. The new tapes did not go in until after I had substituted our library’s biographies of Elizabeth Crossen for those that Mister Brandel had just read. These found their way into my backpack behind the information desk. Naturally the staff were badly shaken by what had happened, but it was two hours before the police allowed us to leave. As I walked for the Underground station I thought of Harriet, and of how much I owed her.

The very first thing I did when I got home was to light a fire. Next I got out the scotch and poured myself a generous measure. By the end of my second glass the fire was burning hot enough for my needs. Into the flames went a stolen accessions stamp from the Nunhead library, and as this burned I began ripping up the biographies of Elizabeth Crossen and feeding the pages into the flames. I was working on the last book when Harriet phoned me. She had heard about the suicide on the news.

‘Whoever he was, he imagined that he really was a time traveller,’ I told her.

‘But why did he do it?’ she asked. ‘Nothing seems to make any sense.’

‘Obsession with the past,’ I replied. ‘Some people really let it get to them, you see that sort of thing if you work in a library for long enough. I think he fell in love with Elizabeth Crossen. In a way it was a clever fantasy.’

‘You mean he was pretending to be a time-refugee, and pining for his sweetheart in the past?’

‘Yes.’

‘*That is just magical!*’

How could I tell her the truth? Brandel had been killing Elizabeth’s suitors one by one, then travelling forward in time to read about how history

had changed. It had never changed to his satisfaction, so he had gone on killing. Surely this said something about his chances with her, but love was apparently blind in this case. How many lives had I saved by driving him to suicide? Quite a few, I hoped, because I was feeling decidedly guilty. Could I be prosecuted for murder? Probably not. Accessory to suicide? Possibly. I could possibly plead self-defence on behalf of potential victims who had died back in the nineteenth century, and point out that I did it because there were no time-police ... my head started to spin, and I decided to stay with the pretend-time-refugee story.

‘Brandel was reading of how Elizabeth married Robert Bell at the library tonight,’ I said aloud, as much to solidify this version of events for myself, as to tell Harriet. ‘I watched him, wallowing in grief as he read of how his girl met, then married, another man. He was unable to stand it any more, so he killed himself.’

‘But he’s not a real time traveller, is he?’

‘No, he’s just done a good job of looking like being one. So far the police can’t trace him as someone modern. As far as they are concerned, he might as well have been a time-refugee.’

‘Hey, intense. Like, in a sense he had got what he wanted. He escaped these times, and died as a man from, er, when did you say?’

‘1810.’

‘Wow. As plots go, it’s got a lot going for it.’

‘Yes, although it’s sort of real,’ I agreed.

‘Er, look I don’t want to sound, like, crass or anything, but I don’t suppose I could come over now, could I?’ asked Harriet in her rarely used tentative voice. ‘I mean, to get a few impressions while they’re fresh in your mind? This could make a fabulous book, in fact I think I could sell over a thousand copies if I get it out really fast.’

I had seen this coming, and I did not mind at all. First I had lost Emily, and then I had developed something of a crush for Elizabeth before saving her for a life with Robert Bell. I was lonely, and Harriet was the sort of company that I really needed.

‘Better be quick or you won’t get much sense out of me,’ I warned. ‘I’m about to pour my third scotch, and I’m stretched out in front of a roaring

fire.'

'Give me just twenty, I'm on a scooter, remember?'

* * * *

The biographies of Elizabeth Crossen that I had hurriedly scanned and re-written from the originals, then self-published in runs of one copy each, had been quite slim. This was because in my version of history she had died in 1812. I read my tragic tale as I fed the last pages of the fifth book into the fire. I had Robert Bell taking the king's shilling and going to fight in the Peninsular Campaign against Napoleon in 1809. This he had done to prove himself brave to Elizabeth, yet in doing it he had lost his life. When news of his death had reached her, she had gone into deep mourning. It had only been after a courtship of three years that she had finally agreed to marry Edwin Charles Brandel, formerly of the East India Company. The marriage had been a brief but turbulent one, and had ended one night when he had beaten her to death, then shot himself out of remorse. Some of her last words, taken from a letter written only days before her death, were quoted on my final page.

'He keeps railing against me for being bitter and disillusioned, and not being the girl he loved, yet how can this be? He only met me when fate had already squeezed the joy from my heart and rendered me desolate with loss. Edwin is just one of many who courted me, but fortune willed it that we should marry. Robert was my only true-love.'

When I had written the words, I had hardly dared to hope that they really would drive Mister Brandel to despair. Like a shot taken at a dangerous gunman at extreme range, my words had struck home through sheer luck. As the last page burned I sipped at my scotch and opened my own copy of Abercrombie's definitive biography of Elizabeth Crossen. Mister Brandel was absent from the index, and both Elizabeth and Robert were recorded as living happily together into the 1860s. The lovers were safe, forever, in a fixed and constant past.

The doorbell chimed, then Harriet rapped at the door and called my name. I let her in, and she managed to ask half a dozen questions about Mister Brandel and his suicide before she remembered to ask me if I was feeling okay and give me a hug. By then I did not feel like anything other than immediate bed and sleep without company, but I was very much in her debt. Harriet had taught me about vanity presses, print-on-demand publishing, who to contact, and what they could do in what sorts of timeframes. Without her I would not be the anonymous publisher and

pseudonymous author of five biographies of Elizabeth Crossen, each with a print run of one copy. Looked at from that perspective, the two of us were indeed a slightly peculiar version of Elizabeth Crossen and Robert Bell, and I even found the idea strangely alluring.

* * * *

AFTERWORD

Avatars inspired me to write this story. From what I have seen, people who build avatars on the internet develop something perfect, which usually means fresh, fit, foxy, and financially secure. Well, who said virtual reality was anything to do with reality? I am an author, however, and when I build characters they must be interesting, not perfect, or real readers will not buy my books. In 'The Constant Past', Mr Brandel is trying to build his vision of a perfect lover from a real person. Most people probably agree that turning someone real into your idea of perfection is a better recipe for disaster than looking for a gas leak with a lighted match. Most people have probably learned this from direct experience.

— *Sean McMullen*