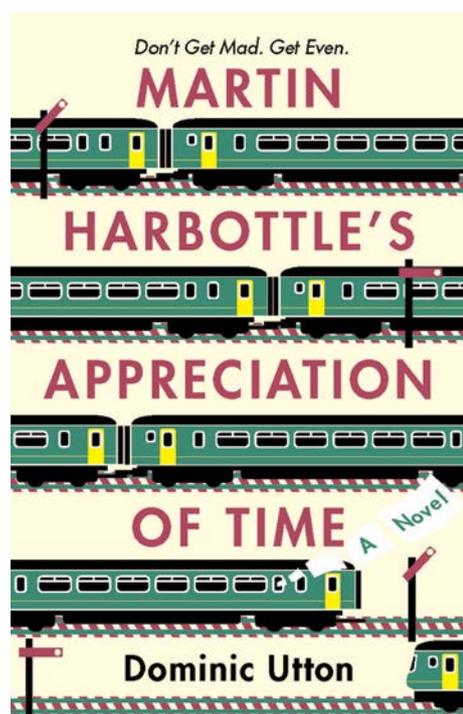




Oneworld Readers' Guide

Martin Harbottle's Appreciation of Time



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Dominic Utton

Dan is a showbiz journalist for a Sunday tabloid, *The Globe*. Commuting Tuesday–Saturday from Oxford to Paddington on Premier Westward Trains, Dan is infuriated by the frequency with which his journeys are delayed.

E-mails are written to the customer service department, but when this fails to elicit a response, Dan turns his attentions to the Managing Director of the company, Martin Harbottle. Each time Dan's train is late, he will write an e-mail that will take as long for Martin to read as his journey was delayed by - bombarding Martin with funny, angry details about his commute, his fellow travellers, and his life at home and work. Martin is at first professionally apologetic, but as time passes and the e-mails build up, he begins to reveal an interest in Dan's life.

Dan is father to a newborn baby, Sylvie, and husband to a wife, Beth, suffering from postnatal depression. His long hours and inability to help Beth put pressure on their marriage and domestic bliss soon sours.

At work Dan finds his newspaper embroiled in a court case with a famous singer that escalates into a legal scandal as their 'shady' investigative methods are uncovered. As his boss, the fearsome 'Goebbels', becomes increasingly unhinged, the police move in, arrests are made, computers confiscated, and Dan finds the 'most famous newspaper in the world' may not live as long as he might hope.

From his train seat, Dan narrates the decline in fortune of his marriage and the newspaper, alongside events in the greater world, such as a revolution in North Africa and youth riots in London.

Finding himself the romantic target of a fellow commuter, the man-eater 'Train Girl', Dan remains loyal to his wife - only to discover her betrayal of him with 'Mr Blair', a left-leaning *Guardian*-reading, pompous and successful single dad. Before long, Beth leaves the house with Sylvie, leaving Dan to slip slowly into a lonely and increasingly drunken despair, exacerbated by the reputational decline of the paper, and the arrests of his bosses and colleagues.

Through all this, Martin becomes a more fatherly presence, a voice of reason that offers Dan advice and comfort, but also reprimands him for his regular intoxicated missives written on board Premier Westward's services.



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Things come to a head with Dan's rejection of Train Girl's propositions, his reunion with Beth and the demise of *The Globe* in a blaze of glory, bringing down the criminal singer who first brought a case against them. Vowing to start afresh with his family, and having no job to call him back to London, Dan stops travelling by Premier Westward, closes his correspondence with Martin and seeks to reclaim control of his life once more.

Questions for Discussion

1. Dominic's novel started its life as a popular blog of his own experiences. How important do you think the autobiographical element is to this book, and how does it affect your reading?
2. Written as a series of e-mails, Dominic's book is an Internet-age reboot of the epistolary novel. How does the form shape your experience of the book, and what might be its limitations?
3. Martin Harbottle's responses to Dan are infrequent, generally terse and professional. How do you feel his character is developed over the course of the novel, and how does his self-representation sit alongside Dan's caricatures of him?
4. Dan's style is often lively, with a tabloid writer's predilection for puns and other wordplay. What do you think of these stylistic extravagances, and how do they inform your understanding of Dan's character?
5. Dan routinely finds himself in dilemmas – whether or not to take his relationship with Train Girl any further, whether or not he should engage in the more nefarious activities of some journalists. How morally do you think he conducts himself throughout the novel?
6. Dan comes to feel that his job forces himself to see everything in black and white, as either right or wrong. How much does Dan, over the course of the novel, learn to 'acknowledge the grey areas'?
7. Martin comes to take on a role straddling therapist and paternal advisor. How do you rate the advice he does give Dan, and what might you have said to Dan, had you been in Martin's position?
8. The novel charts Dan's life amidst a wider theatre of conflict, whether the North African uprising or the London riots. How are these brought into parallel with the broader narrative arc, and what might they tell us about Dan's life? Do you agree with Martin that these parallels might be allowing too much 'poetic licence'?
9. The concept of the Pyrrhic victory runs right through the novel, and Dan finds every success mired by something negative. What can the book teach us about how we conceive of success and failure?



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10. In the middle of the novel Dan comes to feel that life at the tabloid newspaper is somehow less real than life with the baby in Oxford. How do you think the novel reflects on urban life, modern media and contemporary working conditions?
11. In discussing the tabloid's failings, Dan describes the overwhelming need for stories. Do you think this compulsion is matched in his character, who finds himself shifting from complainant to confessor?
12. *The Globe* has some parallels in its demise to *The News of the World*. What do you think Dominic Utton has to say about his former employers, and how has the novel altered (if at all) the way you view the tabloid press?
13. 'I'm not driving the train, Martin, I'm sitting on the train watching it all happen out of the window, powerless to do anything'. Dan's e-mails are born out of a situation he cannot control. How powerless a position does the modern commuter or the modern employee of a large corporation occupy?
14. Dominic's novel is populated with an assortment of often larger-than-life figures. What role do you think the novel's minor characters have to play, and how well do you think they are developed?

Suggested Further Reading

Clarrisa by Samuel Richardson

On the Road by Jack Kerouac

e by Matt Beaumont

About the Author

Dominic Utton is a journalist and author of fifteen years' experience. After going freelance from the *Daily* and *Sunday Express* in 2001 he has written for newspapers including the *Guardian*, *Sunday Times*, *Daily Mail*, and *Mirror*, as well as magazines including *Cosmopolitan*, *Elle*, *Maxim*, *Zoo*, and many more. He lives in Oxford and currently commutes to London six days a week.