

# **BLAST FROM THE PAST**

**by Ben Elton**

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## **1. About the play**

Part noir thriller, part hilarious send-up of the politics of extremism, *Blast from the Past* is based on Ben Elton's novel of the same title. Set in London in the staid, politically-correct era of New Labour Britain, the story of lost love rekindled to no good flashes back with comic effect to the early eighties, a time of protest, strikes and Cold War.

In these early eighties, when Polly Slade was a seventeen-year-old ideological peace protestor and Jack Kent was a U.S. Army captain stationed at England's Greenham Common, the two had a secret and improbable love affair against the backdrop of the year-long demonstration against American militarism outside the airbase. No two people could have had more to argue about, save that they couldn't live without each other, yet one day ambitious Jack came to the conclusion that he loved soldiering more than Polly and sacrificed their love to be a career army man.

Now, sixteen years later, Polly is a sadly single thirty-something social services employee while Jack is a four-star general in line to become the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Before his promotion, he returns to Britain to surprise her, his only true love. With only one night to resolve their differences, and a knife-wielding stalker lurking in the shadows, for everyone concerned this will be a night like no other.

## **2. About the author**

Ben Elton was born on 3 May 1959 in Catford, South London, to a distinguished academic family who had originally fled to England in 1938 to escape Hitler's anti-semitism. Ben's father and uncle were professors at Surrey and Cambridge, and his grandfather was a renowned classical historian in Prague who lost his professorship when Hitler invaded.

The youngest of four, Ben went to Godalming Grammar school, joined amateur dramatic societies and wrote his first play at 15. He wanted to be a stagehand at the local theatre, but instead did A-Level Theatre Studies and studied drama at Manchester University beginning in 1977. Rik Mayall and Adrian Edmondson were in their final year doing the same degree when Ben arrived.

After graduating in 1980, he started on his career as a stand-up comedian, and by early 1981 had joined Rik Mayall and Adrian Edmondson at the Comedy Store in

London. He was paid £15 every time he performed his comedy routine, and soon became one of the regular comperes.

Originally his stand-up performance was meant simply to showcase his own material, but from there he wrote and acted in television, and wrote novels, plays and now screenplays – while still maintaining his stand-up comedy performances: his early work saw him writing for, and on the TV-screen with, later stars such as Emma Thompson, Stephen Fry, and Robbie Coltrane in the comedy show *Alfresco*; later, he went on to write shows such as *Spitting Image*, *Blackadder*, and *Mr. Bean*. His novels include *Gridlock*, *Popcorn*, *Dead Famous*, *High Society*, and *Blast from the Past*.

Ben Elton has cited influences as diverse as Morecambe and Wise, and Noel Coward, and besides being a highly successful comedian both as a writer and on the stage, he is also known as a prolific political voice – his Anti-Thatcherist and progressive political stance have informed much of his work. In *Blast from the Past*, however, he shows that he can easily portray and master both sides of a political argument, while at the same time revealing their respective faults and errors.

He currently lives in Notting Hill, West London with his wife Sophie Gare, whom he met in Australia while on tour. She plays the saxophone in the all-female group *The Boom Babies*.

### **3. Characters**

#### *POLLY SLADE*

A feminist/pacifist revolutionary with the pseudonym *Sacred Cycle of the Womb and Moon* in her teens and early twens, Polly now is a lonely thirty-something social services employee at the Office of Equal Opportunities. She has few friends, her slightly disillusioned life is made miserable by a demented and potentially violent stalker (a former client at her office), and she can only afford a small, shabby one-room apartment in one of the less attractive London neighborhoods. In the face of her non-existent love-life, Jack's unexpected arrival after more than sixteen years rekindles some of her nostalgic memories of their once passionate relationship, but Jack's reactionary political views and slightly aggressive tendencies also make her aware that maybe his sudden disappearance sixteen years ago wasn't such a bad thing after all. Still, in between accusations of betrayal and rape and political disagreements over just about any topic, for the most part of the night Polly feels

increasingly attracted to Jack and wants to give in to her desire and to relive the passion she once felt with him.

### *JACK KENT*

In line to become the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Jack Kent returns to England to pay a surprise visit to the only woman he has ever truly loved. His egomaniacal Rambo personality makes him a blatant symbol of U.S. political corruption and male inadequacy towards women, but as a human being he is also torn between sexual obsession and blood-thirsty ambition. For Polly, his attitude towards women and homosexuals in the military is shockingly Neolithic, and yet, despite his complete betrayal of her trust more than sixteen years earlier, he is the only man she has ever loved. But Jack is married to another woman now, one he doesn't love but cannot leave in order not to jeopardize his career. When Polly tries to seduce him, however, he resists – and it only become clear at the end of the play why.

## **4. The peace protests of the 1980s**

When the US military decided to deploy Cruise and Pershing II missiles in Europe in 1979, an outcry went through the European Peace Movement. This move by NATO sparked a new wave of protests against US military presence in Europe, and against nuclear weapons in particular. Feminist groups played a strong role during those protests in Great Britain.

Activists soon set up Peace Camps in the vicinity of US military installations. The protesters owed much of their organization to feminist organizations, which played a key role in the establishment of these Peace Camps outside air bases such as Molesworth and Greenham Common. These camps became staging grounds for protests of Non-Violent Direct Action – which, despite being non-violent, were highly confrontational, and at some times drew thousands of activists. Thousands of women were arrested during the existence of Greenham Common Camp from 1981 to 1994, when the base was decommissioned to be returned to civilian use.

The end of the Soviet Union in 1991, and the subsequent reduction of US military presence were the most important factors contributing to the closure of several military bases. Nevertheless, peace activists and feminist groups claim to

have played a key role in the removal of nuclear missiles. Considering their at times massive presence and activity, they certainly contributed to the closure of several military installations.

## **5. Radical feminism**

This branch of feminism was at the cutting edge of the movement from approximately 1967 to 1975, and to this day provides much of feminism's theoretical basis. Partially, Radical Feminism was a product of the Peace and Civil Rights Movements. Its central claim is that the oppression of women cuts across racial, cultural, or economic boundaries, and that women's liberation therefore would bring about broad societal change, possibly in revolutionary proportions.

Radical Feminists proposed ways of overthrowing the inherent oppression of patriarchal society which ranged from symbolic acts of subversion of gender roles, such as not shaving their legs, to political activism alongside the Peace Movement or on the fringes of society. In the play, for example, Polly finds herself in a group that fuses Radical Feminism with Eco-Feminism, as the nature of the camp and her self-chosen name indicate.

Obviously, Radical Feminism was, and is, no uniform movement in itself. Some Radical Feminists would later advocate change from within mainstream society, while others keep providing the Feminist Movement with an avant-garde theoretical foundation. The radical branch of feminism may not be as universally accepted anymore as it once was, but its role as a breeding ground for many feminist ideas cannot be denied.

## **6. Possible assignments**

### **General discussion/writing tasks**

- Jack claims that the feminist movement and liberals in general have rendered the world ungovernable. His examples include the accusations against US president Bill Clinton, and how they distracted the commander in chief from doing his work.

Is he right? What should be the priorities? Give arguments for both sides.

- Polly claims that her non-violent protest helped change the world. Jack, in contrast, argues that the protesters made fools of themselves at best. Yet Jack also blames the feminist movement for many of the military's problems. Is he unwilling to see the contradiction of his position, or are those separate issues? And to what extent do you think do protesters have an impact on political decision-making?

Consider events you have witnessed, and argue either that protesters have power, or that they ultimately do not change things. Try to consider, and defuse, possible counter-arguments and examples.

- Jack says that he still loves Polly, but he is willing to sacrifice her life for his career. Write an inner monologue in which he makes the decision, assuming that he really does still love her.

- Write a diary entry in which you explain how far you can imagine yourself going to further your career.

- One of the things that anger Jack is that men get severely punished for making what he considers to be "silly mistakes," i.e. sexually harassing women. Polly, however, considers these "mistakes" to be symptoms of severe injustice. What would you consider fair punishment for sexual harassment, given that there are several degrees of such harassment and corresponding punishment?

### EXCERPT I

JACK            So you live alone?

POLLY          I do now.

JACK            Now?

POLLY          I was in something for a long time but the relationship had problems.

JACK            What kind of problems?

POLLY          Oh, blonde problems, brunette problems, he wasn't choosy.

JACK            But you weren't married?

POLLY          No, I think marriage is an outmoded and fundamentally oppressive institution, a form of domestic fascism.

### POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Try to explain Polly's understanding of the concept of marriage? Why does she think marriage is "outmoded" and "fundamentally oppressive?"

What does Polly mean by the term "domestic fascism?"

What is your own opinion of marriage? Is it outmoded?

Which form of partnership do you think is best? Or best for you?

### POSSIBLE TASKS

Write an essay in which you discuss the pros and cons of the institution of marriage in general – include Polly's statement and evaluate it critically.

Write a dialogue between Polly and her boyfriend after she has found out about his latest affair.

Continue the dialogue between Polly and Jack. How does Jack respond? What do they say next?

Put yourself in Polly's position. Write a letter in which you tell your mother/a friend that you have ended the relationship and why.

Put yourself in the boyfriend's position after the break-up. Write a letter in which you try to explain to Polly what happened and ask her to forgive you and give you another chance.

**EXCERPT II**

- POLLY I'm not interested in your Neolithic opinions. In fact, I have no idea why I'm even having this conversation, I have to work tomorrow.
- JACK Oh yeah? What do you do?
- POLLY I'm a counselor.
- JACK What, you mean like a therapist?
- POLLY Not a personal counselor, Jack, a town counselor. I'm with the Office of Equal Opportunities.
- JACK What? You mean, it's your job to make sure there's a suitable quota of disabled black Chinese sodomites getting paid out of public funds?
- POLLY Yes, that's exactly what I do. You're incredibly intuitive, Jack. I had no idea you were such an expert on local government.
- JACK We have people like you in the Army. Checking out we have enough women in combat training. Homosexuals, that's next. A queer quota. Can you believe that?
- POLLY Does it offend you?
- JACK Damn right it offends me!
- POLLY Yes, I imagined it would.
- JACK And you think that makes me a fascist, right?
- POLLY Well, I certainly think it makes you a bit of a dickhead.
- JACK Have another drink, Babe, and let me tell you something.
- POLLY Don't call me Babe.
- JACK Christ, where do you people get off! "Gays in the military." What's it got to do with you anyway? You don't care about the army, you hate it, you wish it would turn into a network of crèches for single mothers! But you still think you can tell us how to run it ...
- POLLY Hang on, hang on! Me? Don't lay your shit on me. I'm only a council worker in Camden.
- JACK I'm talking about your *kind*, Polly. It doesn't matter where you come from or what job you do. Your kind are international.
- POLLY My kind! What the fuck do you mean, my kind ...?



### POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

What is Jack's opinion of equal opportunity and affirmative action? Which strategy does he use to make his opinion clear?

What do you yourself think of equal opportunity and affirmative action?

What is Jack's opinion of women and homosexuals in the military? How do we know?

What is your own opinion on the topic?

Why does Polly not want to be called Babe?

Jack argues that since Polly doesn't care about the army, she has no right to say how it should be run. What do you think?

Who or what does Jack mean by Polly's *kind*?

### POSSIBLE TASKS

Put yourself in Jack's position and write a letter to the editor of TIME Magazine in which you explain your point-of-view on affirmative action and equal opportunity. Use women and homosexuals in the military as examples to illustrate your point.

Put yourself in Polly's position and tell a friend about the conversation you had with Jack. Explain Jack's opinion and evaluate it critically. Try to be reasonable and find arguments for both sides, and end with your (Polly's) personal opinion.

Write an essay in which you distinguish between equal opportunity and affirmative action and weigh the pros and cons of each of the two.

Write a dialogue between Jack and a woman in combat training who has just failed a physical test but wants to take it again.

Write a press release for a feminist organization in which the organization demands and justifies free career choices for women in all fields of work.

Write Polly's diary entry about her conversation with Jack.

### EXCERPT III

POLLY I can still remember every detail of the morning you left. Waking up in that guest house. The brown carpet, the orange coverlet, the floral pattern nylon pillow slips. The clock radio flashing the time, 88 past 88. My little summer dress crumpled up on the other side of the room, where I'd thrown it off when I was happy. My Doc Martens kicked onto the floor, my bra in the waste paper basket, my knickers on top of the kettle. And nothing of you, Jack, not a trace of you remained. I might always have been alone in that room. You'd even plumped your pillow before leaving.

JACK Bed inspections. The habit dies hard.

POLLY I think at that moment I thought I would kill myself. I went downstairs and asked after you. The woman inside the little reception hatch said you'd left hours before, she wondered that you hadn't said goodbye. I can still feel her withering contempt. Do you know what she said to me, Jack? She said, "Well he paid my bill, love." I knew what she meant immediately. What else would she think? When a smart-looking chap with money turns up late and signs a grubby slip of a girl in as his wife and then sneaks off and leaves her.

JACK I'm sorry.

POLLY She said you'd paid for breakfast, but I just ran.

### POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

What kind of memories does Polly have of her night with Jack at the hotel?

What did the receptionist mean when she said, "Well, he paid my bill, love"?

How does Jack react to Polly telling him all this?

Why did Polly run away?

What do you think when you see an older man (Jack was in his early 30s at the time) with a young girl/woman (Polly was 17)?

### POSSIBLE TASKS

Discuss relationships between older men and younger women and state your opinion. What about older women and young boys/men (e.g. Demi Moore and Ashton Kutcher)?

Put yourself in Polly's position and write a letter to your best friend after you've run away from the hotel.

Put yourself in Jack's position and write a letter to Polly in which you tell her that you're sorry. Give an explanation why you had to leave.

### EXCERPT IV

- POLLY        Our last night together, in that guest house. You made love to me like your life depended on it. You made love to me like a beast ...
- JACK         You too! You wanted it! You were totally involved! What are you saying here? That I raped you? When you wanted it every bit as much as I did?
- POLLY        Yes, of course I wanted it. I gave myself, utterly and completely and happily.
- JACK         Thank you!
- POLLY        But do you think I would have done that if I'd known, Jack? That you were leaving? That your plane was booked. That your bags were already packed. If you had taken me to your little hideaway that night, a seventeen-year-old girl, Jack, and said, "What I'm going to do now is fuck you for 2 hours and then walk away without a word and never see or speak to you again," do you think I would have let you?
- JACK         Well, no, but ...
- POLLY        That's rape, Jack. Not big rape maybe, but rape of sorts. You took me by deceit and manipulation. You took something I would never have given if I'd known the truth and you left me feeling abused ever since.
- JACK         Hey, Polly, people get dumped! It happens! Get the fuck over it!

### POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

- What is Polly's understanding of rape? How does she define it?
- Does Jack agree with her? How does he react?
- What is your own opinion? Where does consensual sex end and turn into rape?

### POSSIBLE TASKS

- Write Polly's diary entry in which she explains what happened and what she thinks.
- Write Jack's official statement in which he defends himself against the accusation of having raped Polly.
- Write an essay on the question where a line can be drawn between consensual sex and rape. Use Polly and Jack's last night as an example.
- How does Polly react to Jack's aggressive behavior? Continue the dialogue between Polly and Jack.
- Write a dialogue between two friends discussing the question whether Polly's last night with Jack should be considered rape or not.
- Write the prosecutor's opening statement to the jury in Jack's rape trial.

**7. Vocabulary**

knickers	Damenunterhosen
bug	Insekt, hier: Ungeziefer
intercom	Gegensprechanlage
a nightie	Nachthemd
"for old times' sake"	um alter Zeiten Willen
a domestic	hier: kurz für gewalttätige Auseinandersetzung in der Familie
pathetic	armselig
"That's what they said at Nurenburg"	Polly bezieht sich auf das Kriegsverbrechertribunal von Nürnberg, 1945-1949.
to barge in	hineinstürmen
to barge out	hinausstürmen
exclusion zones	hier: Nichtraucherzonen
"what are you, Eisenhower?"	Dwight D Eisenhower, amerik. General im 2. Weltkrieg und 33. Präsident der USA
to inconvenience sby	jemandem Umstände machen
sartorial considerations	Kleidungsbezogene/modische Überlegungen
dustbin liner	Müllsack
dressing gown	Morgenmantel
to entertain sby	hier: sich um Gäste kümmern
wardrobe	Kleiderschrank
to do sth. on a whim	spontan/nach einer plötzlichen Laune etwas tun
fertilizer	Dünger
booze	sl. Alkohol
to sit on the fence	frei übersetzt: zwischen den Stühlen sitzen
to dwell on sth	bei etwas verweilen, auf etwas näher eingehen
to have sby traced	den Aufenthaltsort einer Person herausfinden lassen
to be a cinch	eine Kleinigkeit / ein Kinderspiel sein
to courtmartial sby	jem. vor ein Militärgericht stellen
Little Chef	Autobahnrestaurantkette in GB
deliberate	absichtlich
pompous smart asses	aufgeblasene Besserwisser
impaled	aufgespießt
gear stick	Schaltknüppel
wanker	sl. Wichser
to take the piss	sich über jemanden lustig machen
soundest principles	einwandfreie/logisch zwingende Grundlagen
femmos	sl. Feministinnen
counselor	Berater

council	hier: Stadtrat
equal opportunities	Gleichberechtigung
queer	sl. schwul
crèches	Krippen
communal showers	Gemeinschaftsduschen
dugout	Schützengraben
grunt	ugs. einfacher Soldat
to hit on sby	jem anbaggern
scaffolding	Gerüst
cleavage	Spalte / Dekolleté
to restrain oneself	sich zurückhalten, sich beherrschen
hostility	Feindseligkeit
hangups	Komplexe / Fimmel
starry-eyed	blauäugig, naiv
perimeter fence	Einfassungszaun
to get credit for sth	für etwas Anerkennung bekommen
to fancy sth	auf etwas Lust haben
juvenile	jugendlich / kindisch
gutless	ohne Mumm
"to do a runner"	hier: verschwinden ohne zu bezahlen
tart	hier: Prostituierte
"SALT2, Duran Duran, RaRa Shirts, Live Aid, George Michael's stubbly period, Kettle Crisps, Thatcher getting shafted by her own bastards"	mehrere Ereignisse und Erscheinungen der 80er-Jahre (vgl. Wickie, Slime, und Paiper in Österreich), die Aufzählung endet mit dem Sturz der konservativen Premierministerin Margaret Thatcher durch die eigenen Parteigenossen im Jahr 1990.
fertilise	befruchten
"Is that a gun in your pocket Jack or are you just pleased to see me?"	Satz aus dem Standardrepertoire des Kriminalfilmgenres, der mittlerweile hauptsächlich der Persiflage dient.
"informal understanding with Special Branch"	eine inoffizielle Vereinbarung mit der Sicherheitspolizei
Oliver North	amerikanischer Oberstleutnant, berühmt geworden durch seine Rolle im Iran-Contra Waffenskandal während der Reagan Administration
injunction	gerichtliche Verfügung
"to hit a guy discreetly"	hier: "einen Kerl diskret umbringen"
to get promoted	befördert werden
"zapping towel heads"	frei übersetzt: Turbanträger wegballern
"that Grenada thing"	Jack meint die "Invasion" des kleinen karibischen Inselstaates Grenada durch US-Truppen im Oktober 1983, die offiziell amerikanische Studenten auf der Insel schützen sollte
to whimp out	sich wie ein Schlappschwanz verhalten

conscripts	Einberufene
"the shit hits the fan"	„Die Scheisse trifft den Ventilator“ – Bezeichnung für extrem negative Entwicklung einer Situation
dishonorable discharge	unehrenhafte Entlassung aus dem Militärdienst
grudge	Groll
to chuck about	herumwerfen
Chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff	Vorsitzender des amerikanischen Generalstabes
to resign a commission	den Offiziersrang zurücklegen
leftist McCarthyism/Crucible:	Vergleich zur "Hexenjagd" auf vorgebliche Kommunisten in den 1950ern durch US-Senator McCarthy. <i>The Crucible</i> ist Arthur Millers Theaterstück über die Hexenprozesse von Salem 1692, das als Kommentar zur McCarthy-Ära gedacht war