



Nicola Barker

Clear
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How close to the David Blaine spectacle were you? Were you living near the exhibit at the time, or were you influenced by the media blitz covering it?

I was very close to it. I live in a flat just over the other side of Tower Bridge, on the river. When I found out that Blaine was coming to my neighborhood to starve himself, I thought it was the most ridiculous idea I'd ever come across. I just ignored the whole thing. I wasn't interested. But after he'd been there for about a week, my curiosity got the better of me. I used to take my two dogs out running in the morning — very early — and so changed my usual route to cross the bridge and have a quick look at him. As soon as I arrived on site I was hooked. From there on in I went to see him most days. I was initially delighted (and amused) by the impact Blaine was having on my local environment, but then things started to turn nasty and it grew increasingly difficult — as a local — not to feel implicated in the whole thing. Even responsible. The media coverage was almost entirely superficial and violently anti-Blaine. It was unbelievably inflammatory. I ended up writing a letter to *The Guardian* in

response to a repugnant column by a journalist who felt it was funny to actively encourage people to attack Blaine. Ironically, I'd recently published a novel (**Behindlings**) which was entirely about the nature of charisma: When I went to see Blaine it was as if the novel had split open and come to life. It was a very strange feeling. All of these factors made me sit down (a week before the fast ended) and start writing. The book took only three months to complete. I wanted it to be a snapshot of a particular moment. I wanted to try and make the people who derided Blaine sit back and think — to analyze why it was that he made them feel so angry and so threatened.

Which of the character's opinions about David Blaine most closely aligned with your own, and why?

As a writer (and as a person) I've always celebrated the outsider, the stranger, the interloper, the freak. The main aim of all my fiction is to render the unlovable, lovable. If there's a character in the book who thinks Blaine is a lunatic and loves him for it, then that character would be the closest one to me.

What made you want to write from the male perspective?

It just happened. I've written three novels in the first person now, two of those narrators are male and one is female. The reasons why you end up choosing a particular sex to narrate for you are often quite mundane and plot based. In the case of **Clear** I felt like the people who seemed to hate (and feel most threatened by) Blaine were male, so it made sense to approach the issue from that perspective.

All of your characters are looking for meaning in David Blaine's exhibit: the Holocaust, art, the strength of the human spirit, and capitalism. What do you think David Blaine wanted his exhibit to represent?

All of the above and more. The most powerful forces (creatively/commercially/artistically) in modern culture tend to achieve that power by employing a whole range of religious/transgressive/historical signifiers. This — I believe — is what Blaine does. But I couldn't honestly say if it was conscious or unconscious.

What do you feel about the mass hysteria surrounding David Blaine's exhibit? Were people too fixated? Did the exhibit deserve all this attention? Did it maybe help open up a dialogue?

I suppose my answer to that question is contained in the pages of the book. If I didn't think it was important I wouldn't have wasted my time using it as the basis for a novel. I have no idea how an American audience will respond to **Clear** (I just can't guess) because it's so much a book about London and her prejudices, at that very particular moment in time. It's a book about what xenophobes the English are, about how anti-semitism is alive and well and flourishing in the UK, about how we love to laugh at and ridicule the things we don't understand. In many respects it's a savage attack on the shortcomings of the English race, but I have a nagging suspicion that our shortcomings are pretty much universal.

What are you currently working on?

I interrupted a long novel called **Darkmans** to write the Blaine book and now I'm back working on it again. If you were to try and summarize it in a sentence then you'd probably say it was a book about how history isn't just something that happened in the past, but a juggernaut with faulty brakes which is intent on mowing you down.