Introduction; DBC Pierre What is going to screw us now is using terms like new normal, because it immediately suggests that we can, in any outrage, we can normalise it by simply say ‘it’s new normal’.

Lee Brackstone Hello and welcome to this podcast for the Durham Book Festival. My name is Lee Brackstone, and I’m an editor and publisher. I’ve worked in publishing for 25 years, and most of that was spent at Faber & Faber, where I was lucky enough to work with the writer you have all tuned in to listen to, DBC Pierre. Hello, Pierre, how are you?

DBC Pierre Hey Lee, how are you? Good to hear your voice.

Lee Brackstone You too. Where are you calling in from?

DBC Pierre North Cambridgeshire in the fabulous fens. If you don’t watch the news, you wouldn’t have realised anything had changed up here. So I’m just burrowed in, waiting for the zombie apocalypse.

Lee Brackstone So at the risk of embarrassing you, Pierre, I’ve prepared a brief introduction, as if we were in the real world, if we could maybe even imagine that we’re in the glorious surrounds of the Durham Town Hall. Have you been to the Durham Town Hall?

DBC Pierre Of course, yeah.

Lee Brackstone I thought I’d just give people a little bit of history of our work together and your books, and then we can crack on and talk about Meanwhile in Dopamine City and just generally. When I first met Pierre in a bar in Balham, in South London, I think it was the night before the 9/11 attacks on New York, wasn’t it Pierre?
DBC Pierre It was. 10 September 2001.

Lee Brackstone Yeah. And I was a young editor at Faber and he was an unpublished writer, soon to become a superstar writer. He’d written a novel called *Vernon God Little* which had been submitted to me as a potential publisher. And I drank it in with the thirst of a man who needs a good, long, strong drink. I remember loving it, and I desperately wanted to publish it. Thankfully, after an eventful night in the pubs of South London, the end of which is murky, Pierre wanted me to publish it, too. So we worked on the book together, and we published it in January 2003. What do you remember about that moment, Pierre?

DBC Pierre That was amazing. It’s still numbing, you know, it’s like a fever dream. You know, it feels like, to give you the modern context, it’s like the *Tiger King* part of lockdown in your mind. When you just think back to this this feverish, extraordinary moment, it was fantastic. First of all, we did have a very big night. Balham hadn’t completely gentrified back then and there were still some good dives.

Lee Brackstone Well, I remember we were both completely skint and that’s kind of a very ignoble position for a publisher to be in. I mean, I think I was only 27 at the time or something. But I remember having to borrow a fiver off you for a taxi.

DBC Pierre Yeah, yeah, but it was a fantastic night. I mean, of course, next day, still with a hangover on board. Literally, I think it was about 1:45 in the afternoon, which was just prior to the 9/11 attacks in New York, Claire, the agent for the book, phoned up with your offer, which I immediately accepted and jumped around.

Lee Brackstone It did seem to both of us, I remember at the time, very bizarre timing given the subject of the book, it being a Texan school massacre and a book about the death row, etc. And it felt like it sort of drops like a bomb in this moment of huge trauma in New York.

DBC Pierre The world shifted around its axis and around that book, which sealed its fate. Do you know what? I don’t know if I ever told you this, but I found – I always kept notebooks with
scribbles and stuff, and I found a very fervent note I’d scribbled to myself, basically, to the effect that I was going to turn this into a book and I was going to try and scratch the clouds out of the sky, and things written in Spanish. But I discovered it and I dated it: September 11, 1999. There was almost a temporal cycle running underneath it: bang, bang, bang, bang.

Lee Brackstone And of course what followed that year in 2003 was, I suppose you’d describe it as a literary fairy tale. Although I would caution against one of the debut novelists getting too excited by this story because it’s a rare one, but Vernon God Little became the most celebrated book of the year, won a succession of prizes, including the Booker, and you found yourself on the road, literally from Slovakia to Sunderland, reading from this book and making appearances, and it was translated into 40 languages, and it changed your life considerably, didn’t it?

DBC Pierre Yeah, it did. Of course, there was no time to digest and calculate any of that. And so it was a hell of a juggling act. And it went on for some years, in the midst of which I was still trying to write and stuff. So it was an interesting time. I’m extremely grateful. Yeah, it’s a hell of a ride. And of course, we survived it. And here we are. And now, we can still do stuff. And it was fantastic. But it’s probably not recommended for somebody who hadn’t spent their life thinking about this. I mean, I didn’t really know anything about writing or publishing. When I started, I had never, at the time, met a writer or an editor or publisher, anything. I’d zero idea. And, you know, I just put my best foot forward and tried something out. And so every single thing was a learning curve.

Lee Brackstone I think there’s something really beautiful about that, and really helpful that any writer or any kind of artist, can just land like that and make the kind of impact that you did. It was an intuitive book, that you wrote, and it spoke to the zeitgeist, you know. You weren’t chasing the zeitgeist. Publishing had to catch up with you, really, at that moment I think.

DBC Pierre Well, it was extremely well published, so that was something we did together. Thank you very much. That was perfect. And the amazing thing at the time, you know, obviously, the book must break a lot of rules, and it was purely a work of spirit – trying to get
my spirit on the page. But the small tweaks and the things that you and Faber did with it left those. You decided it was a concrete enough spirit to leave them in, and I'm eternally grateful for that, because it probably could have taken a lot of work to hammer into the type of form that would be expected. And I kind of wondered if that would happen, but you didn’t do it. You said, “It stands alone, and that’s great.” So thank you.

**Lee Brackstone** Well, you have to trust the artist’s voice, so the principle consideration in these matters. But for people that maybe are not so familiar with your career after that, over the next 15 years or so we worked on another four books, two of which were novels, which alongside *Vernon* formed a loose trilogy, which we referred to as the End Times trilogy. *Ludmila’s Broken English* was your second novel, and that was about two recently separated conjoined twins called Bunny and Blair, who bear more than a passing resemblance, I would say, to the Labour leaders of the time, Gordon and Tony – which is not the last of several County Durham-related riffs in this conversation, because you actually grew up there, didn’t you, Pierre?

**DBC Pierre** I’d spent brief but significant times there. So I can't really say ‘grew up’, but I was there at crucial times. My mother made sure that I was there at crucial times. So if you add the time together, it’s actually fleeting in time, and it might be a year or less, actually. But of course, that is a long time when you’re a kid. And there were some extremely poignant and pertinent things that happened there that actually set me, in a strange way, on the course to what I ended up doing. I returned to school there for a little while.

**Lee Brackstone** Yeah, it feels like, to me, that you’ve always had a very profound connection to the place. And that painting that you just sent me is remarkable. How old were you when you painted that?

**DBC Pierre** I don’t know, I’d be in my – I’d be an adolescent or something. I actually can’t remember. But one of the things I unearthed which is pertinent is just, for visitors to the UK, or even to Europe, it’s amazing how many people you bump into – folks in the States and around the world – and of course, the vision of England, if they haven't been here, is the Queen and
Big Ben and Buckingham Palace and red buses and stuff like that, like fairy tale castles. And the truth is, I can’t think of anywhere in the country that more fulfils the promise of this country as a place to visit than Durham does, in terms of that incredible fortified hill with its Castle and Cathedral, and the town kind of tumbling off of it down to the river – almost a moat, that beautiful big coil of the River Wear. And people don’t know about it. They will go to so many different castles and places, and really that is a one-stop shop. And so as a kid that was incredible, because it was the fairy tale Dungeons and Dragons type of place. I was absolutely fascinated, not least, of course, because I was connected – I have family still there today. A fantastic bunch in my timeline, and one of whom I was baptised with in the church in Carrville, on the edge of Durham City. And of course that whole crew, my aunts and uncles, were there when I went to school there for a little while. And so it was the place I would have loved to have spent that whole time. As it was, I got just enough, you know. I had the seed planted, and I’ve gone back there whenever I can. I’ve been to as many Miners’ Galas as I can, across the years.

Lee Brackstone Yeah, I remember that very fondly. Once, that must have been 2003 or 2004, the summer when we went together.

DBC Pierre It must have been, yeah, and we’ve got a lot in common up there. We’ve actually got relatives down the same pit in our history and people from the same town. So it’s a really interesting link.

Lee Brackstone It’s probably best we don’t go and investigate that too closely [laughter]. We’ll end up finding out we’re cousins or something. I always think of you as quite a nomadic person but you feel this very strong sense of place and belonging as relates to Durham. What is it about the place, do you think?

DBC Pierre There’s a human connection, there’s a link up there. This was something I’ve touched on in the piece that I wrote. Quite apart from the City and the amazing geography and the architecture of the place there is, among the people of that county – and surrounds, I must say, but specifically there – there is an extraordinary temperature of human being, which my
mum was really, really keen that I get to know. And it was as if – I don’t think she did this knowingly, I don’t think she would calculate this – but what she tried to do, and what she actually did, was make sure I knew that actually roots didn’t have to be geographical, so much as they had to be about the type of humanity that we came from and that we wanted to come from. And there’s just something incredibly strong about the people there. They’re strong, loyal, full of humour and full of wit, you know: folks that actually would give you the shirt off their back, and who would fiercely defend you. And it’s beautifully reflected, actually in this – this was something I remember as a kid – how awesome it is the first time someone calls you ‘our Pierre’: “Oh, that’s our Pierre – he’s ours.” And that’s just a local habit. But you go, okay, there is in, using that piece of language, there’s a sense of inclusion. And of course the place I was born, Australia, that’s a whole other set of links. But it’s, you know, it’s a more spread-out spot. And I just hadn’t experienced anything as close-knit as I found in Durham, and it was specifically that: the human element and the extraordinary lengths people will go to in constructing the right way to do things and to think about things, and the incredible humour they do with as well, which is stolid as hell. And once you grow up a bit, and you understand that actually, in a very real sense, County Durham and its surrounds are the heart of the Industrial Revolution – they’re the absolute heart of the modern day, in a sense…

**Lee Brackstone** But they also have the agricultural thing that’s still going on, that lives alongside that, don’t they?

**DBC Pierre** Absolutely, yes. That was my granddad that started out on a farm actually, down near the border with North Yorkshire, and had come up into town. And that started a kind of family oscillation of great privilege, to great poverty, to great privilege, to great poverty, which kind of ancestrally has whipped down through me as well. And I’ve refrained from having any children so as not to subject them to any more of the ancestral whip. I figure each one of us is the lash end of an ancestral whip, and you get all kinds of the strange dynamics that can travel down through generations – and it travelled down through my granddad through my mum and through me, and it’s like, actually it needs to stop there because that’s a hell of a wild ride. That’s got nothing to do with Durham, that’s just our particular branch of the family.
Lee Brackstone So shall we talk a little bit about the new book, which I’m incredibly impressed by, and envious of whoever got to edit it at Faber who succeeded me. It was a very strange experience reading the book, it being the first book that you have published without me as your wing man, for good or bad. But it’s an incredibly timely and of-the-moment book, as pretty much all of your novels have been. It’s called Meanwhile in Dopamine City. It was published last month. It perhaps, I suppose, echoes the world of Vernon God Little most, but it is very much radically its own thing; radically inventive linguistically. It makes me think about what you were saying about the use of that phrase, 'our Pierre,' and if that was the time that you really kind of started to look at language and think about language. Because this book is partly all about language, isn’t it, and how its meaning has fallen apart?

DBC Pierre That’s a good point, actually. Yeah. And people forget that all of human life and all of human construction, socially, is built with ideas. Of course, we don’t know the future, and the past is completely open to interpretation, so it’s a very, very insecure place that we live in, as creatures. But thankfully, we have intelligence. And what we’ve done is built, actually, a second world of text, which is completely formed of ideas. And these ideas actually alter brain chemicals. They form part of the way that we act towards each other. And so it’s absolutely obvious that the words we use and the way we structure our language will completely affect the way that we deal with each other and the outcomes that we actually have in the real world when we do stuff. And you’re absolutely right, of course. Now, information is the new battleground in the world, and it’s the new wealth. And it has been taken from us, with all the zeal of the early Spanish Conquistadores, who simply saw empty lands with indigenous peoples and took them for themselves and declared them theirs. And that has happened to information.

Lee Brackstone Who are the present day Conquistadores?

DBC Pierre Oh, the present day Conquistadores are the big tech companies. This is kind of the last novel in that series of modern day dismay, if you like, because I think, regardless of everything else that’s happening – there is a lot going on, and there’s a lot of social change trying to happen, and we’ve also got the blight of this virus upon us and etc – but actually,
underneath all this, for the future of self-determining humans, there’s only one battle left, which is already kind of half lost. And that is the battle for our own data, and for information about us and about our behaviour, which is being, by declaration, taken from us; being harvested using surveillance devices, including these that we’re using to speak right now, today.

Lee Brackstone Right now.

DBC Pierre Yeah, and it is being used to make psychological models, to make personality models, with a view to later controlling our outcomes by modifying our behaviour. And that is the stated goal. And it’s the type of thing that, if it were launched all in one go, it would be extremely illegal and would cause an incredible outrage. But it’s happened inch by inch by inch by inch, until now it’s a little bit unstoppable. And I just wanted, in the case of this book, Dopamine City, I wanted to put the last old school guy – and that’s where it is kind of a bookend to Vernon, and it’s a shame that you weren’t there. I mean, you were there up to the last moment of this – but it’s a bookend to Vernon in that it’s just the last stand-up guy in the world, who has an old set of values. It would be a guy born in the 1980s.

Lee Brackstone Is Lon the character you’re talking about?

DBC Pierre Yeah, exactly. Yeah. Yeah. Lonnie, the protagonist of the book. I just wanted to show one guy with a set of values which we’ve had up until a decade ago, and more or less agreed upon, and I just wanted to throw him into the deep end of the modern day as almost like a flag in the sand. Because, unfortunately, speaking of language, what is going to screw us now is using terms like ‘new normal’, because it immediately suggests that we can, in any outrage, we can normalise it by simply saying, “it’s new normal”, and it’s not normal and should never be normal. But we’re on a vertical curve, and it’s going to be very hard to stop it. We’re kind of numb to it now.

Lee Brackstone The terrifying thing is these companies – this way of communicating, of harvesting data, of exchanging information – has only existed for 25 years. What do you think
the purpose of... is there a sinister purpose behind this, do you think? Because you certainly get that sense in the book.

**DBC Pierre** There is a sinister purpose. I mean, what’s happened, which people don’t really... everyone thinks, first of all, that under EU rules, you can opt out of, you can say no, to certain things. That doesn’t matter, we now have discovered. You know, the functionality, which is called essential for all these services, will completely harvest anything it wants from you, including your voice, your face, your feelings, your blood pressure, if it gets access to that information. Your bowel habits, who you associate with, the credit ratings of the people you associate with. This is very rapidly growing into a farm of people and what we don’t realise, as we think, **Okay, well, it kind of doesn’t…** it’s invisible, first of all, so there’s no obvious immediate effect. But something very, very crucial has happened in only the last... in about 2003. And it is that we have stopped being the client. You know, if you think back to the good old days, when our biggest problem was watching too much TV and having to withstand your mouthwatering foods in advertising and all the things trying to snare us to consume. The thing is, society was in a pact with the market, then, in that the market said, “We’re going to serve you and we’re going to tempt to you as much as we can, but you are the customer. And at the end of the day, if you don’t want it, if you’re not going to buy it, then we have to live with that.” What has happened with big tech is that a few years ago, about when **Vernon** was published, we stopped being the client of these services. And so they no longer need us in the equation in terms of consuming the service, because the service is becoming ubiquitous. Now there’s a second market, behind the service, where they’re selling our behaviour as a prediction product to a market in order to guarantee sales and to guarantee consumption. And so we’re no longer the client and there’s no longer a social contract with the market. And that is very new and very unusual. We are just the farmed product, and it doesn’t matter if we consume or not because if they don’t get you this way, they’re gonna get you that way. Something you use ubiquitously will be harvesting your behaviours. I mean, you know the Roomba vacuum cleaner, the little automatic vacuum cleaner? The new model of that has a camera on it, and part of its essential functions is to map the interior of your house and also to record data and send it back and sell it in a pact with big tech in the backend. So anything with ‘smart’ in the name of it is going to get you and, you know, you can imagine within the next decade anyone who is young today...
will be completely owned, and will be manipulated by the market because they will know your weaknesses. And you know how dangerous it is to give your weaknesses to someone who doesn’t love you.

Lee Brackstone To use the phrase *du jour*, how do we break the circuit of that? What can we do to take back ownership of our lives, of our information, of our relationships? Or is it too late? Knowing you very well, and regarding you as a great friend, I never think about you as a pessimist. I think of you as an optimist, but these are dark ideas. These are ideas that I subscribe to, and it’s fascinating to hear you talk about it in a much more articulate way than I could manage, but do you have any hope that we can escape this pact that we entered into 20 years ago with technology and social media?

DBC Pierre Well, here’s the thing: we never entered into a pact, and this is at the root of the problem, is that the decision was taken out of our hands. We were regarded, and our behaviour is regarded, as a virgin territory free for the taking. And under the guise of using words like ‘personalisation’, we have very unwittingly entered into this. And we need to first of all be aware, obviously. We like our devices. I love the technology – I’m not anti-tech. I think some of these are great ideas…

Lee Brackstone But you don’t use social media at all, do you?

DBC Pierre I don’t use social, no, because it’s date rape. Facebook is date rape. Facebook experiments with you already. You know, as much as I think they’re cool toys, there’s no particular reason for me, first of all, to do that. And I think what’s going to happen is that first of all, we need to be aware of the extent. And I think people just aren’t aware of the depth, and especially of the forward plans. It goes all the way back to B.F. Skinner and radical behaviourism, which posits that all human life is accidental, and that we’re basically ignorant and should be controlled.
Lee Brackstone  There’s a line in the book – I think I’ll just paraphrase it, but I remembered it, it stuck with me – which was, ‘we seem to have forgotten that we’re here to eat and not be eaten’.

DBC Pierre  No, we’re being farmed. And particularly the book is about trying to raise kids. Because if you have kids, if your kids have a device, they are being farmed. And by the time they’re adults, all of their weaknesses, all their bodily functions, all their friends, all their dreams, hopes, will be owned – not only owned by big tech, but will not be accessible. That’s the other thing. That data does not belong to us. It belongs to them by their own declaration, and so there’s a huge secret divide underneath all this, which is really scary. I mean, in the medium term, what’s going to happen, of course, is it will entrench and elite in the same way that any new industrial phase in history does. Whereas we, the knowledgeable ones, for instance, your bosses at big tech companies are not going to have their behaviour raped in this way. And anyone in the know, anyone with an education enough, will be able to at least thwart it, and at least make it difficult to get a complete picture. But it’s such a shame, because this could be a real human emancipation. People are suddenly getting used to using their voices. We can contact each other. It’s been a godsend, in the current year of the virus, that we can all still be in touch. I mean, these are very cool tools. And it’s such a hell of a shame that for the sake of profit – there is no darker motive than that – for the sake of immense profits, that it has to be such a date rape, the whole thing. Microsoft is now doing it. Facebook, obviously. Google is the ringleader of all this, and the inventor. It needed one of them to say, “Do you know what? I’ll be happy with just $10 billion. And why don’t I start the platform where the data belongs to you?” There’s actually a great book, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* [by Shoshana Zuboff]. It was released last year, but it points out… I mean, the scary thing about all of it isn’t even so much that this can happen, because, of course, wherever profit can see a way it will go there. The scary thing is that we’ve normalised the ideas around it, as if we accept that, somehow, we owe that data to strangers. And that book spoke of back in, I think, 2001 or so, but early in the century, an experiment to build an aware home, which was like a smart home, where all your appliances gathered data from you to discover your behaviour, but with a view to learning and making things easier for you. So the lights went on when you needed them, and the heating came on and all this. But that experiment was designed completely to make sure that
those data never left your house. It was absolutely just taken for granted that of course, those data belonged to you and they would stay in your control and in your house. They were not connected to any external internet, because it just – think back a few years, it’s not something you would think of. Why would it go to a stranger? That’s ridiculous. And that little experiment was used as an example of the last moments when we thought that way, without even having to make a decision. Of course, we don’t want data leaving our house if it’s about us and our intimate behaviour. You think about it, you know, your intimate behaviour: your arguments, the things you wish you hadn’t said and done, which we all have, you know, every week of our lives. That is stuff you don’t want out of the house. And somehow, in our thinking, we’ve kind of gone well that, it’s kind of okay, if we think it’s in return for free services. And it’s absolutely not.

**Lee Brackstone** The sense in the book is that we’ve become dehumanised. And we will forget how to regret things like that. We’ve also forgotten how to embrace an idea of mystery in our lives; I think everything is explained. And this is one of the other – we’ve dived into talking about... there’s so much going on in the book, you know, it’s polyphonic, and we’ve gone straight to talking about the themes, but perhaps talk to people about what the book is actually about and then how the book is structured. Because, formally, it’s incredibly interesting because it allows you to talk specifically about how algorithms dictate our behaviour and our lives.

**DBC Pierre** The book itself is algorithmic. I called it an allegorithm, but obviously we didn’t put that on the cover. I know if it were on your desk, you’d say, “Okay, take that off, as well” [laughter]. But yeah, no, I’m a natural allegorist. I just love that the means of expression reflect the thing being expressed, I just think that’s... it’s a snake eating its tail, of course, but the work itself had to be an algorithm. And it’s mathematically sound. There’s some numbers in there, you’ll note. And if you take those numbers, and compute them on a graph, they should form an immense, flowering rose of all the pages. So if you take the number of each mathematically numbered section of the book, it will turn into a rose, which is something we never should have to do, but it was important to me that it be able to do that.

**Lee Brackstone** Why was it important to you?
DBC Pierre It made it a thing of beauty. The thing is, we’re also living through a really throwaway time, like a ‘get over it, what the fuck, whatever’ time in history, where we can very easily dismiss centuries and millennia of development in favour of whatever instantly looks better. And so I was extremely conscious, setting out on this, that it had to be a lot of work. It had to be really, really meticulous, this book, in the sense of making it clean and making it strong and making it, if possible, beautiful in ways that don’t necessarily influence the reading. But it had to be a bigger object, just to go against the grain, you know? Like it would have suited being a Twitter novel or something like that, where you just go, “Okay, whatever. That’s it.” And I thought, “No, this almost has to be like, the 19th Century job from a garret, where you literally almost carve each letter with a chisel.” I felt I had to go through that in order to show my sincerity about the statement the book is making. So that’s not just that I’m passing judgement the same way that everyone is not passing judgement on fleeting top-of-mind things, but rather that this was a considered and sincere story, and also some fun. So I engineered it to be as fun as possible while travelling through this little algorithm. I designed it to be like a roller coaster. So it has a long set up. I think there’s about 130 pages of set up.

Lee Brackstone Yes.

DBC Pierre It’s your car going uphill – clickclickclickclickclickclickclickclickclick – to the first plot point. And then it just unleashes into the new world, and goes up and down, up and down, and eventually spirals out of control and at the end it spits itself into a conclusion.

Lee Brackstone So can you talk a little bit about form and whether the story or the form came first? Because around a third of the way in or so, about the 130-page mark, the book splits into two columns, one of which runs two-thirds across the page, and the right-hand, justified paragraph runs right down the page and is a sort of newsfeed. And I found that absolutely compulsive, and the relationship between the two texts really illuminating. It’s a kind of really magical structure. How did you intend people to read it? Because I tried reading it in lots of different ways, and I found different ways rewarding, some ways frustrating, but it really keeps
you on your toes as a reader, to cross-reference the two narratives. So which came first, the story or the form? And how did you intend it to be read?

**DBC Pierre** The story came first, and actually, unbeknownst to you, I could have probably delivered this a year earlier, but for my feeling that the book didn’t express our entry into such a binary life. Which – take away all the dangers in the background of surveillance – we have undoubtedly entered a binary life, where we’re not only dealing with the things in front of our eyes and within reach of our hands, but now we also have the phone or the screen, and we have situations at a distance. And they can be important situations. They can be a love affair; it can be an important purchase; all this other stuff; news – we’ve taken to it like ducks to water, the fact that our life is now split into the immediate here and now, and some nominal virtual other place.

**Lee Brackstone** We’re very biddable, aren’t we?

**DBC Pierre** We really are. I mean, it’s fun. The other thing, too, is that life can be a drag. I mean, it’s fucking difficult to be in possession of a brain when you’re a human [laughter]. Isn’t it though? You know, “We should be doing this,” – especially in modern society, think about it: how many of us are actually going “I should really be doing this, but I’m not gonna. I’m actually going to do something else”? Those little pressures and mind fucks are just so constant that of course we love a distraction as well. And this is just a great way to go, “You know what, I have to look at the news. I have to ping someone on WhatsApp.” It’s a great way to actually get out of the duties of the mind and to think too much about stuff. Thinking can be really disappointing. I think a lot, and generally speaking, if you think things through at great length across days and weeks, you know, it’s unusual to come to a happy conclusion about stuff…

**Lee Brackstone** You always end up in a melancholy place, yeah.

**DBC Pierre** We’re constantly on the run from ourselves, as well, and these devices play into that completely. That’s human nature, and that’s a different issue. It probably would be enough of a problem by itself, without there being any dark agenda going on. But it was important for
me that the book express our departure into that binary world where one thing is happening here, something else is happening somewhere else, but they do kind of influence each other. And hence, I went back and spent an extra year to build two-thirds of it in a binary form. And the way to read it: first of all, you don’t have to read it. I took great care to make sure that the story... what happens is that the narrative, the story, continues, but it gets quicker. The rollercoaster goes downhill from that point that it turns binary. But you find yourself with two columns on the page. On the left is the narrative continuing the story with all the same characters, and on the right is a newsfeed with snippets from that world. Now, they grow increasingly relevant to the story, and they sometimes influence what’s happening in the narrative, but you do not have to read it. You can actually just read that narrative and speed through it, like a rollercoaster ride. And the thing is, you will be aware, as you do, that something else is happening on the right-hand side. You don’t have to read it. You can ignore that, but that awareness will still give a sense of binary-ness. If you do read it, people have different techniques. I, myself, tend to read the narrative, because it still has a plot. Then I would follow the narrative to a natural conclusion for the duration of one voice, and then when it comes to a natural kind of chapter break, then go back and catch up on the news. You’ll see we’ve also made the strength of the text there... the actual strength of the ink fades in and out, according to the pieces that are more important to the narrative than others. And so out of the corner of your eye you’ll catch a sentence or a little chunk of writing, which just shows you that life is split in two and will eventually come together in some way.

Lee Brackstone I think, as a device, it’s very representative of the experience of life, because I found the right-hand newsfeed narrative very compulsive and sometimes toxic – ridiculous. But I sort of became dependent upon it. It is a separate narrative, and it was a separate narrative experience. But if you don’t mind, I might read one of them just to give people a little flavour of this. This is probably my favourite. I mean, it’s quite a silly one, but I think you’ll like it. Do you mind? Is that okay?

DBC Pierre Yeah, go for it.
Lee Brackstone So it’s on page 341. Each of these newsfeeds, they’re brilliantly structured to – how many words are they, Pierre? Maybe 100?

DBC Pierre Yeah, they’ll only be 100 words. Yeah, something like that. It’s dependent completely on the space. So they’re a formatting nightmare. You know, they had to be adjusted to not run over the page. But they’re not very long, anyway, they’re bite-sized. Everyone’s broken their head on this here: we had Kate Ward, we had Sylvia Crompton. A precise copy edit. And of course, literally, if you change a comma or a full stop, add or subtract one, it can throw 200 pages out of format. And so everyone would go and have their little play of it. And then I would come back and build that up. And then dear Kate Ward had the final job of getting it into a publishable form, which she did, admirably.

Lee Brackstone Well. She’s a real pro. She’s done that for many of my books over the years, for which I’m very grateful, but I want to read this one because like all your books, they’re very funny, and this illustrates that, I think, so here we go:

Lee Brackstone [reading] An intriguing new study has found that the testicles of men, such as welders, who routinely work with heat are up to 30% larger and heavier than the average man on the streets. The effect is thought to come about through internal temperature regulation, as testicles are designed to hang to maintain a lower temperature than the body. In cases of males in close contact with heat, the testicles may expand and grow heavy in order to achieve more separation. Although one scientist who studied welders has admitted that results are purely empirical, saying that welding may simply be chosen by people with larger testicles.

Lee Brackstone [laughter] I love that, and what I love about it is, it lasts as long as they can when you’re listening to the Today Programme and then the news headlines, and then that’s pretty much the way the headlines work, you know. That’s the duration of them. Also, it is sort of the ridiculousness of how we feel we can measure everything; the fact that actually everything in life needs to be explained. And as part of what I was saying about there being no mystery, there’s not even any mystery about testicles anymore, you know, or welders.
DBC Pierre It’s true, it’s true. Just to put that into context for everyone, there is a scumbag welder in the book. This to say nothing bad about welders. He just happens to be a welder. And at a certain point, he becomes quite famous. And the news starts reflecting his fame by feeding him with incredible welding stories that make him even more of a nightmare.

Lee Brackstone I really love that, but I mean, there are dozens of those newsfeeds I could have picked up, and they’re very addictive and a true reflection of life, which brings me to something else that wanted to ask you about is – when Vernon was published, it almost seems sort of quaint to me now that people talked about it as a satire. Because I don’t really feel I can do satire anymore. Can you? I mean, do you see yourself as a satirist? I mean, I don’t think this book is a satire. I think it’s something else. We’ve moved beyond satire, haven’t we?

DBC Pierre I think you’re absolutely right. We had this conversation more than once back in the day. I agree with you that, yes, satire is long dead. It’s impossible to satirise where we’re at, due to it being the new normal, and tomorrow will be the next normal. None of them will resemble the quite strict confines of common sense that we once had. Things worked out better when we kind of agreed with each other on a few basics.

Lee Brackstone So if satire no longer does what it needed to, and once did – which was to hold a mirror up to the world and try to, I suppose, teach us how to be better people or how to look at life in a more empathetic way – and I don’t think either of us are excited by social realism or naturalism in a literary or fictional form, where does the novelist go to remain relevant?

DBC Pierre As you rightly point out, it’s quite ridiculous. This book, its premise is quite ridiculous. And for that reason, I call it photo realism.

Lee Brackstone Mm hmm.
DBC Pierre I’m going to borrow a term from the visual arts. And so that’s absolutely painted from life as accurately as I can depict it. And so it’s a new kind of… it’s hyper realism.

Lee Brackstone Yes. The other interesting thing about the book as you’ve chosen to set it... it’s an anonymous setting, isn’t it?

DBC Pierre The other thing to mention, actually, behind all of these arguments, of course, is that all the issues that are filling our time, notwithstanding the virus, are happening in an Anglo bubble. And so the rest of the world has completely different viewpoints, thank God, due to their languages, in large part, and their cultures. And they’re actually not encumbered by half of the head fucks that we are. And so I wanted the place to be – although it has the rhythm of America and has a little bit of echo of Vernon God Little, just to be a bookend for that whole phase – I wanted it to be an anonymous Anglo small city, which could have been here, or USA, or Australia, or any of these places, you know, Canada.

Lee Brackstone Some of the language feels Australian. But does it worry you? Does it scare you, what’s happening in America right now? Or do you feel like this is a sort of an inevitable unravelling?

DBC Pierre Yeah, you know, what scares me – I’m going to be selfish and plead the Fifth Amendment in terms of the election, if that’s what we’re talking about. I used to, very recently and for all of my drinking life, I’ve been able to sit at a bar and make friends with a Democrat on one side and a Republican on the other. I want those days back again, no matter what happens. I’ve never seen our culture so divided over so many things, and it’s because we’re offending each other. The gloves are really off and not helped by these top-of-mind tools that we have to communicate fragments of top-of-mind ideas, which completely negate consideration, which is the basis of all civilisation. The fact that we can count to ten before we say fuck off, and in fact then not say fuck off, but suggest a third alternative – that has been blown to hell by our gadgets. And we’re using those gadgets, and governments have made the mistake of also using them, and we’re using them now for matters of extreme importance, including nuclear fucking disarmament, and flinging barbs at each other like schoolchildren. A
book came out a few years ago, called I Hate The Internet, by Jarrett Kobek, which is huge fun. And it apologises for itself not being a novel. It is a novel. But what it is primarily is just a really, really deliciously structured gloves-off rant about the internet. And it makes the point early on that anyone who uses these tools is immediately made an adolescent. Anyone on the internet is a teenager. And I think that’s absolutely true. And now, you know, our police forces use smileys and emojis. Adulthood used to also have connotations of responsibility and authority, and we’ve completely thrown that out. And hence, yes, what we’re saying about the divisions in Anglo society. I want to be able to sit again at a table with my black mates, my female mates, my Democrat mates, my Republican mates, my trans mate, everyone, and have a good time. And, actually, the people I know personally, I can still do that with, but we’re an elite now. We’re an elite. I’m scared not so much for the physical goings-on at the moment, as for the fall-out from it. And I’m not sure that we’ll survive that because we keep saying “it’s new normal”, and, you know, it’s not. We should regard this as a bad year and a bad time in history, or we’re going to have the worst century we’ve ever seen. I remain optimistic, but we are going to have an appalling century. The ground is far too well laid. It’s true that on an individual level global poverty is less than it has ever been. I mean, this should be times of real milk and honey for all of us. And there are resources enough for everyone, and notwithstanding the challenges of being on this planet, we actually have everything we need in such incredible abundance. And it seems very likely that we will take it for granted. And, you know, the ground is just too well laid for conflict ahead. Look at how many important countries are becoming authoritarian, totalitarian; how many... democracy has taken a hell of a hit in just the last two or three years around the world. Think about this, speaking of the North, and what makes this country and the modern world great: why is the USA so wealthy, and the countries to the south of it, in Latin America, not wealthy, but poor? And the answer is, the people who populated the USA came from a place where, despite any kind of chaos, strict rules of law, and particularly law governing treaties and properties, were well respected. And hence, it drew investment. Hence, in the USA, you knew that when you bought something, you owned it and it would be protected with the power of the state and with the power of law. And the country grew wealthy as a result of that. Further south they came from a Spanish kingdom – the original conquistadors, they brought those ideas. And those ideas have run through what were actually quite non-corrupt, incredibly noble cultures, and they remain still struggling. And it’s because of property rights.
It’s because of flexible and non-existent power of law. And so we’re having this conversation among us when Britain, without any irony, is saying, “We’re going to breach an international law in order to fix things up for ourselves.” And I’m not going to go into the specific argument. The point is that it’s just one of the things that is, I think, is part of the baby in the bathwater. There’s a lot of bathwater travelling around the moment, and a lot of fucking bits of babies in it. You know what I mean?

Lee Brackstone Yes.

DBC Pierre It’s a collapse of old structure, and you go, on one hand, well, of course, things needed adjusting, and fine and dandy – but to collapse everything from scratch, without having first denuclearised or at least kept those treaties strong, I think is a big mistake, because, you know, there are far too many weapons around, so… Scary. Listen, I was born – I was actually in the USA the year that JFK was shot. It wasn’t me. I was in the USA when Martin Luther King was shot. And I was there for the Cuban Missile Crisis, or I was alive for the Cuban Missile Crisis. And I grew up with that little shadow of nuclear threat from the USSR. And it was nothing near as threatening as the conditions we now live in, for the simple fact that there were statesmen. There were people of grave mind still involved, and there were agreements and treaties and efforts. And there was diplomacy, as well, I guess is what I’m saying.

Lee Brackstone And the ideological bounds were clearly drawn, weren’t they? I mean, we’re now just in the age of universal disinformation.

DBC Pierre Yes, exactly right. It’s true, there were ideologies, that…

Lee Brackstone …that protected the status quo in some respects. Well, look here, we’ve probably used up our allotted time. It’s been a real pleasure. Congratulations on the book.

DBC Pierre Thank you very much. And thank you for commissioning this book, and for giving me the freedom to have this mad exploration. This was kind of like running alongside a moving train because of course times are changing so quickly that I needed to be ahead of them at
least by a year or two, to just get a handle of where things could go in future and make some predictions. Thanks for all the space to do that. And I will deliver your reward in amber fluids over the bar or pub one day.

Lee Brackstone Good, I look forward to that moment. Take care, mate. See you later.

DBC Pierre Thank you very much.