

TIMES 2

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On Tuesday



Warning! Jerks at work

**(The reason we don't want
to go back to the office)**

To you The Gilded Age may be a period drama — to me it's a history lesson

Robert Crampton



The launch of Julian Fellowes's new period drama, *The Gilded Age*, comes at a timely moment for the Cramptons, who tend to spend the winter months held hostage by their TV and sofa. With *The Tourist* seen off and *Vera* about to end, Fellowes's latest upstairs, downstairs check-out-those-clothes saga fills a tricky gap in the schedule.

For as long as I can remember I've had a middlebrow historical extravaganza on the go, making my debut with the actual *Upstairs, Downstairs* in 1971, aged seven. *Upstairs, Downstairs* was on ITV — thus, given the snobberies of the time, many of my contemporaries weren't allowed to watch it. Their loss! It was sublime, the *Downton Abbey* of its day, on a smaller budget.

Throughout the 1970s, until first *Dallas* and *Dynasty* and then girls and gigs took over, soaking up TV period drama was a big pastime. *The Onedin Line*, *Poldark*, *When the Boat Comes in*, *Clayhanger*, *The Duchess of Duke Street*, *Lillie, Edward and Mrs Simpson*, *Churchill: The Wilderness Years*... the list was a long one. And that's not counting the regular one-off Austen, Dickens and Trollope adaptations.

I've tried to fill in the gaps since, but given I saw all these series at an impressionable age, the fact is that much of my knowledge of British history derives from them, just as *Poldark* Mark II, *The Crown* and (God help them) *Bridgerton* will shape the minds of today's youngsters.

What did I learn? That for two centuries, from 1750 to 1950, British society was divided more or less down the middle between charming, slightly hopeless posh people who changed their outfits a lot and mustn't grumble salt-of-the-earth poor people. With not a lot in between, except firm but fair entrepreneurial types in the provinces, all regional accent and burning ambition to have a big country house like "the Quality" they resented so much. Also: drowning on the Titanic was a very real danger for anyone born between 1830 and April 15, 1912, when it sank. If skint, but especially if minted, you had a 50-50 chance of meeting your doom mid-Atlantic.



Julian Fellowes's show *The Gilded Age*

What else? That if you went to the trenches between 1914 and 1918, you probs weren't coming back. That you were highly likely to meet Charles Dance, Maggie Smith and/or Kate O'Mara, just as contemporary output suggests an encounter with Claire Foy at any point in the past 200 years.

That London consisted of precisely one postcode, W1. Therein women who weren't courtesans or cooks were courtesans. Having started out in the second job they were striving to attain the first by way of a spell in the third, ahem, position.

More usefully: by the end of the 18th century tin mining in Cornwall was no longer a profitable endeavour. Shipping out of Liverpool in the late 19th century was lucrative yet risky. Coalmining in northeast England in the 1920s was a thankless job. Achieving upward social mobility in the Victorian Potteries was as fraught with heartache as it was elsewhere.

As for goings-on beyond these shores and longer ago, I like to think *I, Claudius* covered the Romans, *Little House on the Prairie* dealt with the US west of the Mississippi and *Roots* did slavery. Ireland and southern Europe functioned as suppliers of cheap labour and incubators of tiresome ideologies that got wholesomely apolitical English boys killed from time to time.

I suppose it wasn't too bad a grounding in recent history, all in all. And wildly entertaining.

My poor efforts at haggling

The estimable consumer group Which? is urging

customers to haggle over bills with the companies supplying their data and TV needs. And so we should, of course, although haggle in this context should more accurately be replaced by the uglier word "threaten". As in,

threaten to take your business elsewhere. I'm told it works. I couldn't do it myself. Like many Brits, I'd pay a fair bit not to be thought rude. I once haggled on holiday in Marrakesh, assuming it was the local custom, only to be told the

The truth about my CV lies

Two out of three CVs contain a spelling mistake, according to a survey by the jobs website Adzuna. One in three have five or more errors. Applicants regularly get their phone number or email address wrong. As a *Times* lifer man and boy, it has been a long time since I compiled a CV. Back when I did, it's the deliberate inaccuracies — otherwise known as barefaced lies — I remember best.

"Clean, current driving licence": that was and perhaps still is one of the standard clichés you put in under "other skills". My licence was current, yet far from clean. Indeed, it was rather grubby, with seven penalty points accumulated within weeks of passing my test owing to an unfortunate incident involving my dad's borrowed Hillman Hunter, an inconveniently parked car, a failure to stop and a failure to report. But not, alas, a failure to get caught.

"Conversational French" — that was another, roughly translating as: "I can say, 'Bonjour, je m'appelle Robert.'"

I also had to gloss over the four years between school and university when I basically did bugger all. "Travelling" sort of covered it.

More usefully: by the end of the 18th century tin mining in Cornwall was no longer a profitable endeavour. Shipping out of Liverpool in the late 19th century was lucrative yet risky. Coalmining in northeast England in the 1920s was a thankless job. Achieving upward social mobility in the Victorian Potteries was as fraught with heartache as it was elsewhere. As for goings-on beyond these shores and longer ago, I like to think *I, Claudius* covered the Romans, *Little House on the Prairie* dealt with the US west of the Mississippi and *Roots* did slavery. Ireland and southern Europe functioned as suppliers of cheap labour and incubators of tiresome ideologies that got wholesomely apolitical English boys killed from time to time. I suppose it wasn't too bad a grounding in recent history, all in all. And wildly entertaining.

Uh-oh — your Dread returning to the office because of the jerks you work alongside? Don't worry, with Tessa West's help you can sort them out. By Helen Rumbelow

One weird side effect of the Covid vaccine: could it also be protective against jerks at work? Before Covid, nasty, manipulative or plain annoying staff were tolerated, and in some industries — you know who you are — unofficially celebrated.

However, now the end of "work from home" looms and people who had suffered the most tiresome office politics are unsurprisingly dreading a return to that office. If bosses want to entice employees away from their bed-desks, it's time to finally tackle the jerks, says Tessa West, a professor of social psychology at New York University. She has science behind her: two decades of research papers investigating ways to eradicate a modern plague of David Brents.

"We know that after the pandemic people have no tolerance for going back into the office and enduring all this stuff again," West says. "People are quitting in droves. It's really hard to retain folks. This is the moment when we have to rethink how we interact with each other and what types of behaviour people can get away with."

"We know one of the biggest predictors of whether people are willing to come back to the office after lockdown is what their relationships were like with people at work. If they don't want to have to deal with them, they'll want to stay home. And I get that..." she continues conspiratorially, leaving a slight pause. "Because I'm one of those people."

For a moment I can almost imagine we are gossiping deliciously at the water cooler, although we are sitting in our respective homes, her in New York, me 3,000 miles away with a basket of laundry just out of Zoom shot. I take a sip of my tea, wait for this Manhattan-level-glossy 40-year-old ("oh, that's just the video filters" she says, the equivalent of the sisterly bonding in the office lavatories) to continue. I miss this.

It turns out that West, queen of office politics research, which has been edited into advice in her new book *Jerks at Work*, has some of her own drama going on. Spill it, Tessa, I say.

"I did way too much leadership going into the pandemic. In academia that means you piss people off as you're taking their resources. There were three or four people I was glad not to run into for two years. We had a stilted dynamic. It felt nice to escape some of those relationships."

This is West's contention: that we spend longer with our colleagues than the chosen loves of our lives, but compared to the saturation-level of romantic relationship advice, we devote almost zero time to teaching young adults, or for that matter older ones, about the treacherous dynamics facing them at work.

"It affects your cortisol levels, it affects your blood pressure," she says. "Stress at work is a bigger predictor of cancer and heart disease than stress in your marriage. By the time the average person retires, you will have spent a full ten years at work with people you probably had no say over. It's like you are married to 25 strangers."

When we act on our gut instincts on how to deal with this conflict, we're often wrong. For instance, "Be an open communicator" sounds right, but often blows up in your face. Studies show your boss will label you as a "complainer". So basically, I say, we go into the office like lambs to the slaughter. And even more so for Generation Z, who have barely touched a lanyard since graduating: boy are they in for a shock.

"Yeah, for sure," she says. "It is a rude awakening for them to go into the workforce and find people are not mature. We are all basically still in high school, with cliques wielding power. We don't outgrow that stuff."

Her students, she says, have spent so little time in groups over the past few years they are in "arrested development" in how to survive in teams. But it isn't just affecting the young. West consults and talks to executives from big corporations. One from a global computer company sidled up to her afterwards. He had overheard his team savagely bitching about him and was devastated: "I had no idea people didn't like me."

"Lots of folks struggle," West says. "It doesn't matter how experienced you are."

West says her studies show poorer people suffer even more in office environments because they don't have white-collar parents to guide them in the secret code. "There's this huge gap in what we call invisible knowledge. People entering the workforce that don't come from well-connected or professional families often have a naivety that hurts them later. I grew up poor, my dad was a construction worker and he was in the army. So he was very much like 'kill or be killed.' I wonder if I can detect West's father in how straightforward she is.

"So I was on guard but his advice wasn't savvy. There's a lot of research on how social class affects behaviour. People who come from lower social classes are more communal. They want to work on teams where there's equality," she says.

That sounds lovely, I say. "Poorer people are nicer in this regard," West says. "But they get taken advantage of and not invited to things, they are more likely to get excluded."

Nicer people may be attracted to flatter hierarchies as they instinctively know this is not where the big sharks swim. "Jerks are more likely to be promoted to certain roles, which tend to be cut-throat, zero-sum. So for example, law firms where only one person is going to get promoted to be

toxic colleagues are back

COVER AND BELOW: GETTY IMAGES



Right: Professor Tessa West

partner at a time attract competitive Machiavellian people who are willing to do whatever it takes to get ahead. It's not that there aren't nice people who are lawyers, the nice lawyers don't select into those top firms that involve so much competition.

"One career where we see a lot of real jerks is in surgery. I'm doing a study right now, in London, on senior surgeons, and they tend to be pretty arrogant. There is a strong hierarchy between the lead surgeon, the junior surgeon and the surgical nurse and so on, and where you see those rigid hierarchies you see this behaviour."

Also, fields where people find meaning in the work, like education, leads to better behaviour than say banking ("few people like banking, they just like money"). Yet nasty

workplaces are not always so obvious. There is a funny passage in West's book about her years supporting herself through university by working in the shoe section of Nordstrom, a department store in Santa Barbara, California, the neighbourhood of stars such as Oprah Winfrey.

"There were a lot of rich people coming in and the employees were getting really competitive, fighting over \$10 commissions. Retail is one of the most cut-throat environments where you see all the different ways

people torture each other at work. You see the darkest of humanity."

So, I say, Nordstrom's shoes was the *Apocalypse Now* of the workplace. "It totally was. And I think watching those dynamics is what got me interested in studying this."

The sneakiest salespeople were called "shoe sharks". For instance, "Dave", a colleague who was radiantly charming to the boss but would hide from his rival salespeople the most popular size of men's shoes (without which he knew they couldn't make good money). West was appalled, but her boss didn't want to know. She thought West was jealous because Dave was great at his job.

It was a problem that West would devote her life to solving. In her book she categorises seven types of "jerks", from the micromanaging boss — the "most common" workplace problem and one of the most resented, she says — to the "credit stealer" (often men).

She uses her research to offer advice in each case, such as how finding a desk aspect that reduces eye contact with your tormentor makes a huge difference. Finding common ground with a boss builds a bond faster than sycophancy. Using recording apps and meticulous noting of idea generation helps women against credit stealers. In fact, recording work rate in general helps to avoid the "loafers" who coast on the back of others' work, and who have thrived in lockdown.

"There are certain jerks that can really take advantage of the work from home thing, loafers are more able to get away with it because there's less surveillance on who's doing what."

But there is one overriding principle that West wants to convey to employees, and that is "the antidote to jerks at work is friends at work". We approach workplace problems like our other important relationships, one on one. In fact this is a savannah environment and if you are being hunted, you need protection of the pack. Networking broadly in every direction across the organisation — sometimes the receptionist will be your saviour — is the key to defence.

West's overriding advice to bosses is to "see red flags earlier when they're hiring".

"Jerks tell us who they are very early. We choose not to listen, or we tell ourselves it's worth it because we think the skill matters more than the interpersonal stuff. That can be very costly. The company loses other employees."

West is herself keen to get her and her team back into her lab. But my main feeling after reading the book is how exhausting all this people management sounds. I say her book is like a stiff talking-to for those lockdown workers who find they have no nostalgia for the office, in fact spend some time of their WFH day with a tab open on their laptop for "ranches in Montana with a strong wi-fi connection". "Totally, they say, 'I'm moving to Montana!' and you're, like, 'You're going to last two weeks in Montana.'"

The seven types of jerks at work by Tessa West

Kiss up/kick downers have a single goal in mind: to climb to the top by any means necessary. To get there, they treat everyone who is at the same level or below them as competition.

Credit stealers seem like friends, but they'll betray your trust if your idea is good enough to steal. They help with a project but undermine your contributions when presenting it to the boss.

Bulldozers are seasoned, well-connected and not afraid to flex their muscles to get what they want. They have two trademark moves: they take over group decision-making; and render bosses powerless to stop them, through fear and intimidation.

Micromanagers are impatient taskmasters who disrespect your personal space and time. Some do it because they used

to have your job and they're having a hard time moving on, others because they are under the false impression that more monitoring equals better performance.

Neglectful bosses hate being out of the loop — but they often are. Most follow a three-step process: long periods of neglect, a build-up of anxiety from not having a handle on things, and finally a surge of

control over you to alleviate their anxiety.

Free riders are experts at doing nothing and getting rewarded for it. They often take on work that has the veneer of importance but requires very little effort.

Gaslighters lie with the intent of deceiving on a grand scale. They isolate their victims first, then slowly build an alternative reality that suits their needs.

I'm hooked on Disney's hit

Harriet Walker

When I heard that Disney had scored its first UK No 1, with 6.3 million streams of the song *We Don't*

Talk About Bruno, I wasn't surprised. At least six million of those listens were my family — in our house we do nothing but talk about him. OK, I was a little surprised. This is the first time I've known all the words to a No 1 song in at least ten years. I'm 36 with two very small children: chart-toppers tend to be better suited to blasting out in sweaty nightclubs long after my 10pm bedtime. We listen to Bruno ("no, no") mainly in our kitchen, often in the slot before the sun coming up and school starting.

This isn't just any Disney song, though — *We Don't Talk About Bruno* is the big ensemble number at the heart of its latest film, *Encanto*, the soundtrack of which is by the *Hamilton* composer Lin-Manuel Miranda. This means all of it is a) cool and b) practically medical-grade catchy. Another song from the film is at No 5, and one more loiters just beyond the Top Ten at 15.

The Bruno in question is a mysterious uncle with a gift for seeing the future, whose ill portents have shaken the seemingly perfect Madrigal family to its foundations. Set in the hills of Colombia, *Encanto* is less fairytale than domestic saga: troubled teens, riven siblings, an intergenerational mental health crisis set in train by a well-meaning but overbearing magical tiger mom. All this to music that is part Latin pop, part Buena Vista Social Club and wholly Broadway.

Those longer in the tooth will remember a similar mania around *Frozen's Let It Go* in 2014. How lame I thought it all was, pre-kids. I am now not just eating my words but counter-harmonising, rapping and lip-syncing them while my 15-month-old shimmies like a highchair-bound Joaquin Cortés.

Bruno has been boosted by going viral on TikTok, where users have taken to acting out the lyrics, but this is bigger than a social media craze. It is a cultural moment: I heard three people singing about Bruno in different shops at the weekend. One of them had even opted for my favourite bit: "A seven-foot frame, rats along his back..." Not the usual Radio 1 fodder. No doubt about it, *Encanto* is the second-most addictive thing to have come out of Colombia.



Bruno and Mirabel in *Encanto*