

STEVE BAKER

# OUTSTANDING



## Praise for *Outstanding*

*Outstanding* by Steve Baker is witty, engaging, and blends comedy with biting social commentary. With a cast of vividly drawn characters, Baker captures the chaos and pressures of modern education with humour and insight. The story is both amusing and touchingly poignant, offering thought-provoking moments amidst the hilarity. Educators and former students alike will feel right at home in Baker's world of larger-than-life personalities and brilliantly crafted satire. A thoroughly enjoyable read from start to finish!

**Isabella Wallace, education author and keynote speaker**

At one level this is a fabulous well-crafted, fast-paced, humorous story filled with intricate twists and turns and very many laugh-out-loud moments. At another level it might reflect what will be left behind if politicians and the media continue to fuel a recruitment and retention crisis in schools, caused by rushed and badly thought-out policies, biased and disparaging media reports, and a deteriorating inspectorate. Either way, please read this book; I loved it.

**Will Ryan, passionate educationalist,  
teacher, head teacher, writer, consultant,  
and associate of Independent Thinking Ltd**

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## Preface

I began writing *Outstanding* in 2014 and it has undergone endless revisions during the years that have elapsed. However, the roots of *Outstanding* go back much further. When my brother, Tim, and I were kids, our dad treated us to an education in comedy. His record collection included the Goons, Bob Newhart, Stan Freburg, and the great Flanders and Swann, and our bedtime reading might be anything from the Moomins to Spike Milligan's *Silly Verse for Kids*. On Saturday nights, Tim and I sat down with mum and dad to watch the Two Ronnies, Morecambe and Wise, and many other classic comedy acts. None of this was wasted on me. Much later, it was my partner, Sian, who introduced me to the novels of the late, great Tom Sharpe. I owe him a debt, and I hope his readers will feel at home with the larger-than-life characters and absurd situations that abound throughout my humble effort.

I hope you will enjoy the ride!

Steve Baker  
Anglesey

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Palmer's Inn Grammar School, Crockenham  
Tuesday, 3rd September

14 days to go ...

Crockenham was a surprising omission from the book of crap towns that infuriated the residents of Stockport and Skelmersdale. Was it too good to be included? Or too bad? Perhaps it was simply overlooked? The town possessed nothing much to speak of: no weekly market, no famous forebears, no monument to stir a sense of civic pride or purpose, only pawn shops, pound stores, and finger-lickin' takeaways. The Old King's Head, fenced off and boarded up, spewed weeds across its neighbours, though the Good Vibrations sex shop and the Pierced Off tattoo parlour seemed entirely unaware. Beyond the high street? Nothing much but half-dead starts and half-dead endings, grassy squares with 'No Ball Games' and rows of silent bungalows waiting for The End. A year ago, the last remaining bank had closed its doors and then the ATM clammed up, so finding legal tender now meant queuing for cash back at Norman Pott's Post Office after rooting through his yellowing stock for something worth your purchase. After all, how many royal mugs and highlighters could one life accommodate?

Your best chance of employment lay at Farnley's ice cream factory, a fifteen-acre compound of metal, stone, and glass that was prone to dazzle onlookers on sunny days, while a mile upwind stood Allsop's pig farm, a rustic facility whose assault



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on the senses was every bit as crippling. Trapped between the two lay Palmer's Inn Grammar school, a crumbling red-brick disappointment that somehow managed to embody Crockenham's every failing. At one end of its staffroom on this warm September morning stood the perspiring figure of head teacher Harry Flanagan, a man for whom the word 'failing' might have been invented. Flanagan, in his mid-fifties, had been married to the job until he met and married Sheila Perkins. Life thereafter had temporarily brightened, but in recent years he found himself diminished. The school was drifting, and he was drifting with it, like a man on a thin ice-sheet, carrying him who knows where. Flanagan's hair was long gone except for the tufts around each ear and his trouser size was the only statistic in his orbit that was moving in an upwards direction, except for his weight. His rosy cheeks and startled demeanour betrayed a man who had once been leading but felt increasingly out of breath in the effort to catch up. His relationship with Sheila had suffered accordingly and that was before his 'little indiscretion', as he had once dared to call it. Flattered by the attentions of another woman, he had strayed, and Sheila was as furious as she had every right to be. Harry Flanagan was in the doghouse – professionally and personally – and had only himself to blame.

'Right everybody, er ... shall we make a start?' Flanagan was poised to pronounce his welcome on this first day of the new academic year, but the teaching staff were oblivious to his presence as they milled about, grabbing coffee jars from lockers and swapping stories about their summer respite. He raked a palm across his comb-over and attempted a smile.

The previous incarnation of Palmer's Inn, built in 1927,

with its gothic stone porticos and wood-panelled interiors, had possessed character in spades but admitted only boys and, subsequently, only those who passed the eleven-plus examination. This was in stark contrast to the current *comprehensive* Palmer's Inn, a grammar school in name only, which cast its net blindly, accepting children of every possible background, ability, and temperament. Desperate to impose himself on this yawning canvas, Harry Flanagan had commissioned a huge piece of art overlooking the foyer, proclaiming the new school motto: Never Stop Flying. An airborne carpet soared skywards beneath a grinning, turbaned figure who bore a troubling resemblance to the head teacher. Last June, in Sheffield, a one-day course on character had fired Harry Flanagan's imagination, so now this grotesque piece of 'art' was flanked by inspirational quotes from Mahatma Gandhi, Michelle Obama, and Kirstie Allsopp.

Flanagan glanced down at the lectern. Where were his notes? He turned to Sheila Flanagan, his PA and life partner, who was busy pinning up the new timetable. 'Sheila, love, can you go and get the notes for my welcome to the staff? I've left them in the office.'

Sheila fixed him with a glare, before turning back and setting off through the crowd; more staff had arrived, and this annual event was now standing room only. Three weeks later, when the dust, both real and metaphorical, had died down, some swore they had heard Sheila mutter, 'Call me *love*? You bastard!' as she squeezed by them, though others heard only, 'Can I get past?' The truth may never be known, but there is one thing that everyone who was present that morning agrees upon: Sheila Flanagan did not look happy.

‘Please, colleagues, can we? Can we make a start?’ Flanagan’s plea for attention was inaudible over the chatter. A bead of sweat scurried down his arm, like a wet rat spilling down a drain. How had it come to this? Ofsted had not telephoned today to announce their imminent arrival – or, at any rate, not *yet* – but fear that they might would possess Flanagan’s mind until close of play on Wednesday, as it had every week since October half-term – when the school entered the window for inspection – and would continue so to do until an HMI finally made the call. Sheila might put them through at any moment. A dozen words declaring doom: ‘My colleagues and I will arrive tomorrow morning to commence our inspection.’

He might be reading a prayer in assembly or crossing the yard at break; he might be holding a meeting with the leadership team, or eating a sandwich, or wiping his backside. There was no way of knowing when, but one thing was certain: it was coming.

Just then, fettling about with loose change and car keys in his trouser pocket, Flanagan realised that he had left his reading glasses at home, and the knot in his stomach tightened. He peered about the staffroom: still heaving, still full of chatter. In a desk drawer in his office was a baton, a relic of his days as a music teacher and conductor of the Fakenham brass band. Perhaps he should wave it now?

‘Thank you, everyone. Everyone? Welcome back to Palmer’s Inn. I hope you’ve all had an enjoyable and restful break!’ Flanagan cleared his throat and tried again. ‘Thank you, colleagues!’

The last few chatterers fell reluctantly quiet. Someone

sneezed, setting off a ripple of titters, which eddied and slowly died. At long last, the room was silent. Where was Sheila with those notes? Flanagan squinted at his lectern. Still empty. There was nothing for it but to improvise. A brief history lesson would do the trick, even if most had heard it all before. Flanagan gripped the lectern.

‘It seems appropriate, colleagues, as we face a new school year, to consider the legacy of our great benefactor, Ignatius Palmer. As many of you know, this school stands on the site of the original Palmer’s Inn, an eighteenth-century coaching house which, although frequented by all manner of rogues and reprobates, generated a substantial income that the heroic Mr Palmer used for the benefit of the poor and needy of the parish. It is our challenge, blessed as we are with our own rogues and reprobates,’ he paused for laughter, but none was forthcoming, ‘to – to live up to the passion and commitment of the great phil ... um. Philan ... er ... philanderer? ... No ... philanthro ... oh heck ... philanthro—’

‘Pist!’

Heads turned.

Rob Jones, English teacher and self-appointed staffroom wit, looked *very* pleased with himself. Flanagan’s fondness for a tipple was no secret, and there were stifled sniggers from the back of the room.

‘Philanthro-pist, yes. Thank you, Robert.’ Flanagan forced a smile and made a mental note to watch the smug little bastard more carefully.

‘Ignatius Fortescue Palmer dedicated his good fortune to the destitute, the sick and—’

Sheila reached over and shoved a document under his nose.

‘Oh, thank you, that’s great. Now then, I had some words prepared to share with you.’ He blinked, adjusted a pair of spectacles that were not on his face, and lurched on. ‘Now then, we are joined by some new colleagues this year. Mr Lampeter will be teaching maths. Where is he? Stand up. Go on, take a bow. Thank you.’ He moved on. ‘And Miss Tempest ... she’s hiding. Where is she? Oh, yes, Miss Tempest will be joining the PE department. Go on, stand up, love, thank you!’

Sally Mills, recently appointed Flanagan’s deputy head teacher, stood watching this horror show with eyes like saucers.

‘Now then, boys and girls, would you like the good news or the other news?’

Josie Charlesworth, head of RE, spoke up. ‘Give us the good news, for God’s sake, Harry.’

‘Right you are. The good news.’ Flanagan paused. ‘Ah yes. As you know, colleagues, last term I put us forward to take part in *Educating Norfolk*, the splendid documentary series about life in schools. Well, the selection process has finally run its course and I’m delighted to tell you that we have been chosen! I’m sure you’ll agree, colleagues, that this is a wonderful opportunity to show off our many fantastic qualities. The cameras will be rolling soon!’

Absorbing this blow, across the room, heads hung a little lower and eyes closed a little tighter. Only the drama teacher punched the air.

‘Finally, I’m sure I don’t need to remind you, colleagues, that we are in the Ofsted window.’ He paused. The room was silent now. ‘It has been four years, and the judgement last time

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was “requires improvement”, so an inspection this term is very likely indeed. We need to show ourselves off at our best, so let’s get the basics right, okay? Get to your lessons on time, turn up for break duty, and make sure your marking is up to date.’ Some staff swapped meaningful glances. Rob Jones spilled his coffee.

Flanagan forced a grin. ‘That’s all, boys and girls. Have a good day now. Thank you all!’ and with that, he picked up his papers and left the staffroom.

The warning bell sounded. Registration would begin in five minutes. Most of the staff wandered off but two figures remained in their seats. Jack Holt was Norfolk born and bred, taught physics and lived on his parents’ smallholding. At thirty-nine years of age, he remained the chair of the local young farmers’ association but was already an old man. Sitting alongside him was the elfin Julie Peabody, who had joined the school last year as a student teacher of health and social care and was now an early career teacher. Holt, whose Year 11 registration group seemed unaware of his presence at the best of times, was not about to be rushed. He sighed expansively, ‘Of course, I knew him in Fakenham.’

‘You did?’

‘Aye. We were living there. The Flanagans moved down from Sheffield; we lived on the same street.’

‘Oh really! What was he like?’

‘What were he like?’ Holt snorted. ‘He were a daft bugger, like he is now. He taught music there, and in his spare time he held baton for Fakenham brass band. I went once or twice, to competitions, just to be neighbourly like. Then he started getting all political.’

‘What do you mean political?’

‘Other brass bands used to play *popular* tunes, you know, middle o’ road, stuff you can whistle: “Floral Dance”, “Birdie Song”, “Can’t Take My Eyes off You”, stuff like that. What did this pillock play? “There is Power in a Union”, “Street Fighting Man”!’

‘So how did you end up following him here?’

‘Well, they might be queueing up to teach health and whatever-you-call-it, but good physics teachers are like rocking horse shit – rare! Flanagan made me an offer only a fool would refuse.’

There was an awkward silence. Julie Peabody appeared to be counting carpet tiles. Just then Marian Kerslake, the attendance officer, appeared, ‘What’d he say? They’re all muttering like mad out there.’

‘Not much. I were telling young Julie here about our esteemed leader and his shady past.’

Julie Peabody shifted in her seat. ‘I wouldn’t say shady exactly?’

Marian sighed. ‘How did we get in this mess, Jack?’

‘Fair question.’ He raised his eyebrows and exhaled. ‘The Harry Flanagan I knew in Fakenham had some bloody daft ideas, but he had, I don’t know, *energy*, there were fire in that belly of his. Of course, he were only *deputy* head then.’

‘You think he’s out of his depth, Jack?’

‘Could be. He just seems a bit lost to me. And look what happens when he *does* get fired up! I mean, look at that bloody mural.’

Julie Peabody frowned. ‘Hmm. The turban? The flying carpet? Some might call it cultural appropriation.’

## The run up to the inspection

‘Professional bloody suicide, more like.’

Marian stood up. ‘Anyway. I’d better go.’ She paused and lowered her voice. ‘But before I do, there’s another thing keeping our great leader’s eye off the ball.’

For the first time that morning, Jack Holt leant forward, causing his chair to creak.

‘Oh aye?’

‘Him and Sheila. On the rocks. They say he’s been sleeping on the sofa for weeks.’

Just then the staffroom door opened; Sally Mills stood hands on hips. ‘Come on, folks, let’s be on our way.’ Holt remained seated. Marian grinned. ‘Well, I’d best be off. There’ll soon be missing registers to chase up. I’ll see you folks later.’

Sally Mills cleared her throat, and this time Jack Holt took the hint, announcing, ‘All right, it’s a fair cop,’ as he lumbered through the staffroom door, with Julie Peabody close behind.

Meanwhile, upstairs, Sheila Flanagan strode into the head teacher’s office and found her husband staring into space. ‘Do you know something?’ she said. ‘I can’t wait to put that call through. It’ll serve you bloody well right if you ask me.’

Harry Flanagan turned to face her. ‘How many times do you need to hear me say I’m sorry?’

‘I don’t *want* to hear it, Harry.’

He sighed. ‘Look, I know it’s been hard.’

‘Hard? Are you serious? The humiliation of it, and then having to practically run the school, while you let things slide!’

‘I know it’s not been ideal, you know, living and working together, what with—’

‘Not been ideal? Well, that’s the understatement of the



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year!' she snorted. 'But it's not "working" is it? I mean *you're* not working; you've given up!'

Flanagan finally looked up. 'How do we get out of this one?'

'We?' She laughed. 'What do you mean *we*? It's not me that'll be out of a job when the inspectors fail this place, and anyway, Harry,' she paused in the doorway, 'you and I are hardly a "we" anymore, since—'

'I know, I know!' Flanagan turned away, while Sheila left the room, shaking her head.

Witty, engaging, and blends comedy  
with biting social commentary.

Isabella Wallace, education author and keynote speaker

What do you get if you blend a downtrodden head teacher,  
a hostile school inspector, an incompetent reality TV film  
crew, an ice cream factory, and a load of unruly pigs?

## OUTSTANDING

Skilfully balancing satire and wry observation, this highly entertaining book tells the story of an Ofsted inspection set against the backdrop of a struggling school in Norfolk. As mishaps pile up and tensions rise, the unhappy protagonists embark on a chaotic journey that builds to a magnificent and heartwarming climax.

**A hilarious read, not only for hard pressed teachers but also for anyone who likes a good story with unforgettable characters.**

At one level this is a fabulous well-crafted, fast-paced, humorous story, at another level it might reflect what will be left behind if politicians and the media continue to fuel a recruitment and retention crisis in schools. I loved it.

**Will Ryan, passionate educationalist, teacher, head teacher, writer, consultant, and associate of Independent Thinking Ltd**

**Steve Baker** lives in Anglesey, North Wales, with his wife Sian. After a long career in education, from which he is semi-retired, he wrote his highly acclaimed non-fiction title, *That Behaviour Book*, which won book of the year in the *Teach Secondary* awards in 2023. As a life-long comedy fan, he's now turned his hand to that genre.

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