

Ted's Cafe

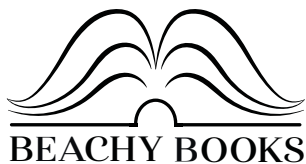
Roger Sanders was born on the Isle of Wight and has lived there all his life. He is married with two sons and four granddaughters. Roger owned a sports shop and online store for over twenty-five years, before his retirement in 2016.

Roger's interests include current affairs, local, social and family history, walking, reading and listening to a wide range of music. He is a life-long fan of Southampton Football Club.

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Ted's Cafe

Roger Sanders



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Set in Sabon

For Teresa, Martin, John and the girls.

I want to express my gratitude to my publisher, Philip Bell at Beachy Books, for his patience and tireless efforts to bring my story to life. Thanks to Vic King, my friend of fifty years, for his input during the early drafts and his enthusiasm and positive response. Thank you to my wife Teresa for supporting me as always. I must also mention Jonathan Coe, whose novel *Middle England* inspired me to write *Ted's Cafe*.

Lastly, thank you to my late parents, John and Heather Sanders, for everything they did for me.

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March 2019

We meet every Wednesday at Ted's Cafe.

It's one of the few establishments from our youth that remains in town. From the exterior it looks like a greasy spoon; from the interior it looks like a greasy spoon.

Almost everything in the town has changed: the small independents are long gone, banished to history, an odd photo on a Facebook heritage group page, a small reminder of those distant days. Those businesses were run out of town with a force by customers' hunger for big multinational chains with their larger choice and low prices—corporate shop fronts looking identical from town to town, selling the same goods, placed in the same order, in the same part of the store. The merchandising manual has exact instructions where the stock should be placed for maximum sales.

Ted's hasn't moved with the times very much. It's now owned by a Polish couple, Jasiek and Danka Kowalski. Ted's family sold out in 2017 when his son Kostos moved to Cyprus to escape post-referendum Britain. I find it ironic his father fled his homeland in the early seventies to get away from the conflict and segregation after Turkey invaded. That's when he had to leave his home in the north of the island and decided to come to England. Now his son is

moving in the other direction to avoid the Brexit backlash and unpleasantness that has become more fervent every day. Now all that remains at Ted's is a framed photo of him behind the counter where he served so many hungry customers, his white apron barely covering his vast stomach, splattered with yellow spots, egg yolk—or is it the colours fading from the old photograph? I'm not sure, but from another time, a time when things were less complicated, calmer, friendly and not as angry.

Alan Grainger and I were in the same year at school. We became close friends when we met at a gig in 1975—a local band, now long forgotten, were playing at a local church hall. We both struggle to remember their name; we think it was 'Storm Crow', but we can't be sure, and it doesn't matter anyway, such a long time ago. We were young men, setting out on an adventure that would be the start of a lifelong friendship.

He's always had a difficult life with regards to relationships. He has always struggled to get it right, often traumatic, disruptive and destructive, often all at the same time. Even when we were young, he would fall in love at first sight, normally with the wrong person.

When Veronica appeared I knew she would be the biggest mistake of his life.

He slumps down in the seat opposite me. That expression, so Tony Hancock—melancholy, troubled, confused.

'Ah, Alan, how are you?'

'Depressed, a bit down if you must know, David.'

I take a deep breath like I always do before I mention her name. ‘Veronica?’

He shakes his head. ‘Well, no, but yes, well... you know how things are, only bad or bloody terrible. It’s Brexit, bloody Brexit! It’s a thing of stupidity built on an ideological folly of nationalism. By the next time we meet it could be all over, us out of Europe, out in the cold. We’re completely buggered!’

So, how do I reassure him when I don’t know what will happen if we fall off that imaginary cliff everyone keeps talking about, especially if it turns out to be real? ‘I know these are troubling times, but we can only wait and see.’

He looks down at the ham and cheese panini Danka has brought to the table. Ted never served paninis, just sandwiches, baguettes. Along with a better range of food, the Polish couple has brought in a couple of new dishes on the menu from their native land: ‘Bigos’, a stew with sauerkraut and shredded cabbage, and ‘Zrazy’, a sausage sort of thing. They have irritated me with two items on the menu, though, referring to spaghetti bolognese as ‘Spag bol’ and macaroni cheese as ‘Mac n cheese’. To me, it’s lazy English, completely unnecessary, but then words were always my passion and how I made a living.

The large TV on the wall has live coverage from Westminster. Wednesday lunchtime is Prime Minister’s Question Time. The set is on mute with the subtitles keeping us up to date with what is being said. There’s a slight delay between speech and words so we try and guess the reply. Theresa

May is so predictable: she never answers a question with a clear response, often none at all. She irritates Alan, reminds him of Edina Swallow, the principal at the academy where he taught. He should be grateful to her for giving him his freedom, but he couldn't forget her rigid, pragmatic, soulless manner. She was always right; you were always wrong. You could have an opinion as long it was the same as hers. I can see the connection with the PM.

Sometimes we are joined by other friends: Charlie Cheek, a builder, womaniser and staunch Brexiter, and Eric Snow, a solicitor who owns a practice in town. You would think the only thing we all have in common was the past: growing up in the seventies, parties, gigs, festivals, drinking, girls, but our friendship is much more than that. I think of us as a band of brothers who have reconnected in later life.

As it's just the two of us today I know Alan will, at some point, mention his 'little friend', as I refer to her. He gets the hump when I mention her but, within minutes, the emotional turmoil, deep inside, boils over and he starts to talk. I'm the priest as he takes confession, the agony aunt trying to suggest an answer, a direction he should go to find peace and happiness.

Alan's biggest problem has always been his wife Veronica. Alan's other big problem has always been the other woman in his life: Dawn Cunningham, Veronica's friend, as well as Alan's best friend, ahead of me and even Veronica.

'Have you seen Dawn?' I ask, trying not to appear too interested.

He perks up dramatically, eyes more alive. He looks over his shoulder and scans the room like a Cold War spy in an old black and white movie. ‘Shush! Not too loud, David,’ he says, as though it were a state secret. ‘I went around her house on Monday—a leaky tap.’

‘Alone?’ I ask.

Before he can reply, Charlie comes through the door and joins us, the moment lost. Alan tries to hide his disappointment. I roll my eyes. We’ll talk about Dawn and her ‘leaky tap’ another day.

Post-Brexit Britain is a very different place since the referendum. Charlie Cheek—never interested in politics up until now—has become connected and energised. Charlie voted ‘Leave’. Charlie hates Europe. Charlie hates Jeremy Corbyn. Charlie hates Theresa May. Charlie wants out, with ‘no-deal’ at all cost, even though he knows the economy may struggle, and it might impact his building company. That’s Charlie.

‘If you ask me we need a strong leader—Farage as Prime Minister to sort it out!’ he says.

Alan looks at me and shakes his head.

‘He can’t be the PM because he’s not a member of the House of Commons,’ I say, trying to remain calm.

‘He failed seven times to be elected,’ chips in Alan. ‘That’s why he’s in the European Parliament, a body he hates but is happy to take a sizeable salary from, plus expenses!’

Charlie doesn’t seem to understand why some people don’t want Nigel in Parliament. Alan and I are all ‘lefty

snowflakes', apparently, too politically correct. I'm dreading Charlie mentioning immigration, especially with our hosts in earshot. Fortunately, his phone rings—there's a problem on the building site, something about a ruptured gas main. He makes a retreat, and we decide to head our separate ways.

Walking home, I feel a bit down. How has it come to pass that friends can be arguing over something unworkable and so badly planned? Never for the good of the country, but a tool used by Cameron to silence the noisy anti-Europeans in his party and to kill off Farage and UKIP. I think Cameron failed hideously, walking away like a spoilt child leaving a terrible mess behind him. When Alan and I meet next we may not be members of the European Union any longer.

Perhaps he will tell me what is going on with him and Dawn Cunningham. I will message him later and try and meet up somewhere quieter than Ted's, probably The Artisan Coffee House on the High Street. We'll moan about the prices, but at least we can talk without being interrupted.